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**DOES THE REPRESENTATION OF  
POLITICS PRESENT A SPECIFIC  
CHALLENGE TO CREATIVE  
PROSE FICTION?**

Volume 1 of 2

D H Spain

PhD

2018

**DOES THE REPRESENTATION OF  
POLITICS PRESENT A SPECIFIC  
CHALLENGE TO CREATIVE  
PROSE FICTION?**

DAVID HARRISSON SPAIN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements of the University of  
Northumbria at Newcastle for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy

Research undertaken in the Faculty of  
Arts, Design & Social Sciences

## **Abstract**

The political novel serves an important function, offering an exploration of political institutions, provoking discourse and inspiring engagement. The aim of this study is to identify the difficulties in producing a political novel and how they might be overcome. By ‘political novel’, this thesis refers to a novel which explores political processes, the exercise of political power or the effects of such political action upon the body politic. To this end, the research question is as follows: does politics as a subject matter and discourse present a specific challenge to creative prose fiction?

The research question is answered through practice-based research in the form of writing a political novel as well as the production of a commentary which reflects upon this creative process. This project argues that the political novelist must overcome several problems inherent in the fictional representation of politics. The first of these is the difficulty of containing the elements of political detail, thought and action within a work of fiction, due to its potential to disrupt the flow of narrative through its opaque and complex nature; the second is the issue of the mode through which the fiction is to be related to the reader and the consequences the use of different narrative voices will have on the presentation of political activity. Finally, there is the challenge of ensuring that an accurate representation of the political scene and relevant political attitudes is achieved.

This study proposes that through the combination of the political elements with personal feeling and affect within the writing, these challenges can be answered in a manner which empowers their writing with a vitality which invigorates the political action within the novel.

## CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE .....	1
CHAPTER TWO .....	11
CHAPTER THREE .....	30
CHAPTER FOUR.....	37
CHAPTER FIVE.....	54
CHAPTER SIX .....	72
CHAPTER SEVEN.....	89
CHAPTER EIGHT .....	104
CHAPTER NINE .....	117
CHAPTER TEN .....	134
CHAPTER ELEVEN.....	148
CHAPTER TWELVE.....	166
CHAPTER THIRTEEN .....	177
CHAPTER FOURTEEN .....	183
CHAPTER FIFTEEN .....	203
CHAPTER SIXTEEN.....	221
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN .....	238
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN.....	258
EPILOGUE.....	270

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my deep gratitude to my supervisors, Professor Michael Green and Professor Keith Shaw for their input, expertise and support, and Northumbria University for enabling me to undertake this exploration of the political novel. I would also like to thank my family, Tim, Nicola and Charlotte Spain for all their encouragement throughout this project, and Shreya Kakkar for proving that her presence improves everything – even this novel.

And, finally, I'd like to thank politics in general for becoming so utterly absurd halfway through this damn novel in what I am forced to assume was a somehow-conscious effort to improve the overall quality of my writing. I truly appreciate the help, but you really can stop now. Really. Please.

## **Declaration**

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this thesis has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by the Faculty Ethics Committee on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2016.

**I declare that the Word Count of this Thesis is 147,971 words (novel: 115,673 words, commentary: 32,298 words)**

Name: David Harrisson Spain

Signature:

# **A NORTHERN EXIT**

A Political Novel by David Spain



## CHAPTER ONE

I had just turned twenty-three when Julian Ashworth and I first crossed paths. Most of my reluctance to take a good long look at my life was because I had no idea what I was supposed to do with the rest of it. A year before, I had graduated from St Andrews with an upper-class second in English Literature. This achievement, I soon discovered, left my options depressingly open, and I had walked out of that fine institution with just as much of a plan for the future as I'd had four years before. Less, in fact, because by then there were far fewer kinds of alcohol I had yet to experiment with.

I managed to bear my lack of direction stoically. I'd never been particularly proud of the money I'd been born into, but in the months following my graduation I quickly learned to appreciate the freedom it offered and not think too much about what exactly the grumpy-looking old bastards in the family portraits had done to get hold of it. Most of the Barrett clan considered an occupation to be more of a pastime than a necessity. There were a few of us holding down a profession, each of which had been considered 'acceptable' by whatever familial committee decided on these things. But seen through a purely financial lens, there was no need for me to find myself a job.

I ended up doing so, or at least having one found for me, for two reasons.

The first was that the boredom which had arrived at about the same time as my graduation photographs didn't fade away with time. Whatever distractions I threw myself at never managed to keep my attention, and more and more I found myself drifting off to sleep in the melancholy certainty that tomorrow would be just as dull and uneventful a day as the one I'd just forced my way through. Boredom steadily shifted into apathy and forcing myself out of my malaise became more difficult with each passing day.

The second was a woman called Mrs Amelia Barrett, who just so happened to be my mother.

While my father took the view that I'd just put in three years of hard work plus one year of dossing around and deserved a little bit of time free from essays, exams and whatever had made his own university experience so trying, my mother took a far more definite line than he and I did on what constituted 'their' and 'my' money. She regarded it as part of her matriarchal duties, and there was no woman more fitted to matriarchy than Mrs Barrett, to offer me more pointed motivation than simple

boredom could provide, steering more and more of our conversations towards my future prospects. After the second week of her campaign to stamp out domestic unemployment, I could barely make a cup of coffee without having the vacancies section of the *Times* slapped across the back of my head, and I took the point.

It wasn't that I had no enthusiasm or interests. There were a lot of things that I wanted from life on a sliding scale from the probable to the ridiculous. I had, at a conservative estimate, about seventy years of life to do them in if I ate sensibly and didn't drink myself into an early grave (one of my mother's favourite predictions), and after that I assumed that either God in His infinite wisdom would already have a place in His grand plan picked out for me or I'd be somewhere where the only items on my to-do list would be 'wail' and 'gnash teeth' for all eternity.

It was little thoughts like that which kept me sane.

I tried to my best to find an area I might stand out in, although what I mostly found was disappointment. Out of everything I'd tried my hand at up until that point, the only thing I'd found myself more than barely capable at was journalism. There was a hell of a lot of people in the world who were happy to lie, cheat and take the world for a ride as best they could, and the idea that there was a whole industry based on finding out what was really going on and making sure everyone knew it was a comforting thought.

I'd been so interested in journalism, in fact, that I'd written for the university paper at St Andrews and had mostly enjoyed myself immensely. Most of the time all I'd had to do to get to the story was talk to people, which was something I liked doing anyway. An astonishing amount of these conversations took place in the pub, but as I was using my own money and getting some printable information into the bargain this just got me a reputation as a born journalist.

But if life was, as Tom Hanks would have it, like a box of chocolates then the confection which marked the end of my time with the university news crew had been dark, bitter and alcoholic, and I'd had nothing more to do with it since then. That, at least, my mother seemed to understand, or at least knew that this would be an argument she could not enter into immediately assuming surrender. The topic of journalism had not been raised.

With nothing concrete I could find to have any enthusiasm in, I decided that the best short-term approach was to focus on employment, and I resolved to do just that.

Resolution, it turned out, was not quite enough. What jobs I found myself attracted to, I was entirely underqualified for, and those for which I was eligible didn't seem particularly interested in what service I could offer. After several weeks of browsing and many earnest attempts at applications, I felt even worse than I had when I'd started, gradually lapsing back into my childhood habits of sleeping late and staring at televisions without noticing whatever they were showing. My mother, having at least witnessed some effort from me, silently made her satisfaction known and the constant stream of CVs continued to issue forth, for all the good it did.

For a while, life passed by without me quite noticing. I had finally found myself in my first slump at the grand old age of twenty-three.

It wasn't until the beginning of winter that the road towards Julian, and everything that was to happen as a result, emerged in front of me.

Possibly as a result of the long nights and the occasional drifts of snow, my whole family was always gripped with a feeling of togetherness around Christmastime, and they insisted upon their annual tradition of laying on parties, dinners and gatherings: various grand houses filled with a vast number of relatives who, after a few drinks, all blended into faint imitations of the one you'd just been talking to five minutes ago.

Any friends I might have employed as an escape strategy had faded away after university, and I had very little else scheduled which could excuse my attendance. So, I wore the jolly Christmas jumpers knitted for me by some doting great aunt or whomever, shook hands with a parade of plump, interchangeable uncles and second cousins, and did my best to make it through the evening without submerging my head in the punch bowl. I never expected anything to come of these events, apart from late stage alcoholism.

But something did come of the gatherings, and it came from a man I had known since birth as 'Uncle Andrew'.

Of all my family members, Uncle Andrew was the one towards whom I felt the most impartial. He was the kind of man who invited it. His hair was black, beginning to grey. His eyes were grey. The suits which, to my mother's vocal displeasure, he persisted in wearing to these parties, were either grey or a slightly darker shade of grey. If it was possible for a man to become lost in a crowd whilst standing alone, Uncle Andrew was that man.

The only times I'd ever seen him stand out, in fact, were at these Christmas celebrations that I was forced to attend. Whereas the majority of my family were

permanently fixed in a kind of noisy upper-class heartiness, Uncle Andrew's personality was as varied and exciting as his colour scheme. At the parties, which he attended religiously, he could reliably be found leaning awkwardly against a wall, a cup of punch consistently half-empty in his hand, occasionally glancing at the clock or raising his eyebrows in lukewarm greeting to someone he must, by deduction, have decided that he was related to.

Despite my own indifference towards Uncle Andrew, I found myself beginning to gravitate towards him. Any questions he put towards me weren't the usual gruff demands of just what I intended to do with myself these days: they were infrequent and asked out of the same uncertainty with which I'd found myself approaching him in the first place. They were the questions of a man who, despite having no desire to make conversation, has decided that he really rather ought to.

I often had the distinct impression that, at first, he had absolutely no idea who I was, or if the two of us were in fact related. But he put up with my company, the two of us typically standing in silence, side by side, watching the rest of our family with a wistful, gloomy feeling. As the weeks went by, however, and the parties continued, we had managed to create some form of comfort in each other's companionship. He was kind in his own way and was, if not the easiest man to talk to, a very easy one to stand beside whilst making meaningless, irregular comments.

Several days before Christmas, I found myself beside him once again, the two of us taking up our usual post as spectators to the great, Conservative rom-com that was our family. After several minutes of muted remarks and murmured responses Uncle Andrew, entirely without warning, leaned slightly closer towards me.

'Tom...it is Tom, isn't it?' This was his most frequent question, and probably his most interrogative.

I nodded. 'Yes, Uncle Andrew.'

He nodded himself, pausing for a moment as if trying to remember what had spurred him to this critical breach in our system of protocol. Then, memory stirring, he continued: 'Do you have any taste for whisky, Tom?'

I was beyond amazed and almost on the verge of asking him if everything was alright at home. This was undoubtedly a cry for help.

Still dumbfounded, I nodded again. 'I quite like it, yes.'

'Good,' he said. 'Then I think you might like to come with me.' And with that, he stepped away from the wall, passing from the room.

In my surprise, all I could do was to follow him in silence, keeping behind him as he led me down a hallway and through a door, steering us into a small study. There were photographs of himself with his wife and children on shelves and decorating the walls, and for the first time I realised that it was his house that we were inside. He hadn't mentioned it and hadn't looked particularly at home in it either.

Uncle Andrew stepped over to the desk, reaching into the drawer and pulling out a long, slim bottle, turning it so that I could see the red dragon printed on its label.

'Welsh,' he said. 'I know it doesn't sound very enticing, but I think you might enjoy it.' He produced two glasses, and poured a healthy measure into each, passing one of them to me.

I took a sniff of the whisky, and then a sip. It burned my throat and made my eyes water, but I managed to stop myself from coughing: as whiskies went, I didn't ask much more than that. My uncle drank from his own glass without a change of expression, gazing absently into middle-distance.

After several moments, he turned his eyes towards me, laying his glass aside on the desk with the air of one coming to a decision.

'Tom...your mother has had a quiet word with me,' he said, almost apologetically. 'She was hoping that I could talk to you.'

*Judas*, I thought. I should have expected that Mum would stick her nose in somehow, but I felt a keen sense of betrayal at Uncle Andrew's collaboration, after the hours we'd spent together in splendid isolation. No wonder he'd been acting so emotionally tonight.

'She was telling me how you'd been having trouble finding something to occupy your time with, now that you're finished with university,' he continued. 'And she wanted to know if there was any way that I could help you.'

Treachery followed treachery. Not only had my quisling uncle engaged in conference with our common enemy (although allowances had to be made, considering that said enemy was his older sister), he had now adopted her domestic policy – forcing me into employment – as his own.

I managed to restrain myself, taking another sip of the whisky as my uncle went on.

'I know employment prospects aren't wonderful right now,' he said, 'and I'm told that you don't have any interest in doing any further courses...?' His voice made it a question, and I shook my head, still fuming at the depths my own family would sink

to. No wonder we were so wealthy, I thought, if this was the kind of morality our previous generations had taught us.

‘Well, I think I might be able to be of some assistance in finding something for you to do,’ he finished, with an almost enthusiastic smile. ‘You know what I do, don’t you, Tom?’

‘You’re an MP,’ I said. It had come as quite a surprise when I’d first found out; I couldn’t imagine anyone voting for Uncle Andrew due to his personality unless his rival candidates managed to present an even less appealing face to the public than he did. I could only assume that one of them had delivered speeches whilst wearing someone else’s skin. What was more surprising, given our family’s attitudes, was that he was a Labour MP. I’d occasionally wondered whether it had been an act of rebellion on a young Uncle Andrew’s part. If so, then he was the only man I knew whose insurrection could take the form of joining the establishment.

‘That’s right,’ he said, nodding vaguely. ‘It’s a very rewarding occupation: quite a lot of fun at times, actually.’

Jesus God, I thought. No wonder there was a bottle of whisky in his desk drawer, if that was the way he talked about his career. Then again, from the little I knew of Uncle Andrew, he’d probably describe being a porn star as being ‘a very rewarding occupation’ and ‘quite a lot of fun at times, actually’.

I gave him a polite smile, not at all sure whether I wanted to get any deeper into this conversation. But apparently my dear uncle had been overtaken by his burning passion for his work as a Member of Parliament, and he kept talking.

‘Do you mind if I ask you, Tom, whether you’ve had much involvement with politics before?’

I considered. I had actually been a member of a political society at university: the St Andrews University Labour Society. Subscription had been cheap and most of the time we ended up in the pub as a matter of course. Our conversations were never going to set the world on fire, but I liked to think that we had been less callous than the Conservative Society and less insane than the Young Trotskyists.

Past that, all I could say was that I probably kept up with politics more than the average person. Dad’s various newspaper subscriptions and his enduring love of *Private Eye* had made that easy enough. I’d never considered going into the field myself, however, for reasons which had quietly made themselves apparent to me over time.

Uncle Andrew watched me as I thought this over, an expression on his face which might just have been understanding. ‘You seem a little undecided,’ he offered, taking pity on me.

I shrugged, conscious that I was probably making a bad impression. ‘I was in a society at uni,’ I said, ‘and I read about what’s going on in the paper, but it’s...’ I shook my head. ‘I guess it seems like quite a long way away. I’d not thought about it very seriously.’ I’d not thought about most things very seriously, if I was going to be honest with myself. There’d not been much need to.

My uncle nodded. ‘But if there was the chance to learn a little more about it – to see how it worked on a practical level, do you think you might be interested in politics? As a career, I mean.’

I was aware of what was going on, even if I probably wasn’t doing a convincing job of showing it. My mother had put her brother up to this, and the pair of us were dancing on strings very much held by her. Politics was probably a respectable enough future from her perspective, and already having an MP in the family just made matters that much simpler.

I considered telling Uncle Andrew that it was this sort of behaviour which had stopped me from taking more of an interest in politics but decided not to in case it stopped him giving me any more whisky.

I nodded. ‘I think so. I mean, it is interesting; I’m interested in it.’ What I said, I was certain, didn’t much matter. By the end of this interlude, Mum would have got what she wanted, and Uncle Andrew would have tempted another of England’s youth towards a life of political service.

Well, it might come to something.

To my surprise, my uncle smiled: an extreme emotional reaction from him. ‘Well, Tom, I do have a friend who I think I could talk to. We work together, and I believe he’d be happy to let you shadow him for a little while.’ He smiled awkwardly at me, taking the whisky in his hand once again. ‘I mean, it’s not like you’d be stuck making coffees or anything like that. I just thought it might, you know, open up some possibilities for you.’

He took another sip of his drink whilst I gave the matter some serious thought. His offer had been extremely unexpected, and I took care not to leap to any conclusions. It was possible that absolutely nothing would come of this. I might spend two weeks being bored stiff and finish that time with nothing to show for it except a resolve never

to become involved with politics again. I might even, to quote one obscure MP, have ‘quite a lot of fun at times, actually’ and perhaps find it ‘a very rewarding occupation’.

Then again, I thought, taking a swallow of whisky, there was always the chance that I might actually enjoy it. And as much money as the family might have between them, it would be quite nice to be able to earn some myself, especially as none of what they had was technically mine.

And, as much of a relief as it had been to never have to hand in another essay ever again, my current lack of stimulus was slowly killing me. I needed, I knew, a distraction that was going to stick. I needed something to set my mind towards. And, if I was going to be thoroughly honest with myself, I likely needed a bit of a prod in any direction I would end up taking, just to get going.

I also needed another drink, so I took one.

Still, something did strike me as odd about the idea. ‘Why would your friend be interested in having me around?’ I asked. The idea that I was to be foisted off on someone purely as a favour was an awkward one, even if it was what I needed. ‘I’ve not got any background or experience in politics: nothing except for the society.’

Uncle Andrew had retrieved the bottle of Welsh whisky and was refilling his glass. He stepped toward me, topping up my own as he spoke. ‘My friend would be interested because one of the most enduring problems in politics, for any party, is how you can make sure that young people vote, particularly for *your* party. So, he’d be keen to pick your brains about that, I’m sure. And because he has fairly pronounced distrust of anyone who wants to enter politics from an early age, which sounds like it would be an advantage for you. And most of all because I think he quite likes the idea of having someone around on whom he can bestow his knowledge.’ I looked at Uncle Andrew to see if that had been a joke, but his face was as devoid of expression as it ever was.

Well, at least I had an answer. Whether it was the whole answer or not remained to be seen; I still felt sure that the only reason anyone would be happy to have me shadowing them was as a favour, or if my uncle was offering something in return. It was doubtful I’d ever find out.

My eyes strayed over to the desk, not wanting to look at my uncle until I had an answer. One of the pictures was out of the uniform pattern by which the others were organised, as though someone had been looking at it before quickly putting it down.

The picture had been taken some time ago; it was certainly older than I was. It showed three men, all wearing almost the exact same suit, seated on a wall. One of



them, sitting on the right, was Uncle Andrew. Looking at him here, in his early twenties, it was possible to see our family resemblance. I'd gotten most of my appearance from my mother, and she'd shared plenty of it with him.

I didn't recognise the other two. One was older than Uncle Andrew or the third man; he looked around thirty, with a thick beard and hair which would have given Mum a heart attack. He sat in the centre, one hand on the shoulder of both younger men beside him. Despite his smile, there was a look in his eyes which was almost fierce. His mind was somewhere other than the moment the photograph had captured.

The young man on the left was the most striking. In contrast to the seriousness of my uncle and the stormy thoughtfulness of the older man, he seemed to be at ease, smiling broadly at the camera as he leaned casually against the railings.

Given their ages and what I knew about Uncle Andrew, I assumed that the two of them were also politicians. Trust my uncle to have a picture of his co-workers so prominently displayed.

Still not secure in my decision but aware that I was going to have to say something eventually, I looked at Uncle Andrew, who was watching me without any show of expectancy on his face. 'That...sounds fantastic,' I heard myself say. 'I'd really like that.'

Uncle Andrew's smile became less uncomfortable. He poured us both another glass of the Welsh whisky, and the matter wasn't mentioned for the rest of the evening.

My mother also remained notably quiet during the car ride home, but every so often I noticed her looking back at me, a smile of her own on her face. Uncle Andrew had most likely reported back to her, letting her know that the boot of purpose had given me a helpful kick. I did my best to ignore her, thinking instead about what I'd recently agreed to.

Several days passed without any word. I moved from room to room in the house, trying to find meaning in activities which held no interest for me. It was a week before there was a phone call, at eight o'clock exactly, and Uncle Andrew relayed his instructions to me.

The meeting which he'd arranged wouldn't take place for several weeks, but at least now I felt that there was something tangible in my future. I did what he'd advised me: I was given money from my father for a new suit and lent some from my mother for new shoes, and then spent the majority of my time reading about politics both in

academic and contemporary terms, trying to become accustomed to the world I was hopefully about to spend some time in.

## CHAPTER TWO

Finally, the day arrived on which I was to meet my uncle's friend. Uncle Andrew hadn't told me anything about the man, preferring to give instructions about time, place and dress code. Our conversation was already painfully protracted, and I was happy to hang up with whatever information he had already given me.

The meeting would be at the Petrus restaurant in Belgravia. Dressed in my new suit and after several minutes of experimenting with tie knots before telling myself not to be so silly, I boarded the tube and tried my best to smother my nerves as we sped towards my arranged lunch. I'd already checked the directions through several times, not wanting to make tardiness a part of my first impression.

I arrived at the restaurant in good time, stepping through the door and looking around at the pristine interior. I'd had my fair share of dinners around London, and I wasn't intimidated by the place itself. I was, however, quite surprised that my uncle's friend had chosen a place this grand for an introductory meeting. Either he had no sense of scale or was looking to make some kind of impression.

The maître d' approached, smiling pleasantly. I silently thanked God for the suit I was wearing. If I'd walked through the door in anything less, I'd likely have either been asked to leave or offered a job as a dishwasher.

'Good...' he checked his watch momentarily. It was about a minute after twelve. '...afternoon, sir. May I take your reservation?' There was no suggestion whatsoever in his voice that I was a walk-in. They were probably offered dishwashing-related interviews as well.

The question did, however, present the first problem of the day. Uncle Andrew had not made the reservation, leaving that up to my mystery dinner date whose name I hadn't been told. This could get interesting.

I gave the maître d' my most charming smile; I was rather good at smiles, and I made this one as inoffensive as I could. 'I believe so,' I said, 'but the booking was made under someone else's name, and I'm afraid I'm not quite sure who it is I'm meant to be meeting.'

I knew immediately that I should have come up with a more convincing story. Telling the truth was probably an elementary mistake in the cut-throat world of reservations and French restaurant employees. I kept the smile going just in case, but I didn't hold out much hope for success.

But to my surprise, the maître d' scanned the open book in front of him with the air of one taking his work seriously, and then nodded, looking back up at me. 'In that case, sir, perhaps you should like to have a drink in the bar. When your friend arrives, I can easily direct them to you.'

I hadn't expected that, but I wasn't about to reject good luck or a drink when it was offered. I thanked the maître d' and made my way over towards the bar: a plush area with low seats and huge collection of liquor. If I'd had a free afternoon and greater access to the family funds, I could have spent an extremely pleasant collection of hours there. Considering that I was probably expected to make a good impression, I settled for a sparkling water and sat back to wait.

As I waited, I found myself starting to think. If whomever I was yet to encounter had chosen this restaurant to meet, they had to be doing something right career-wise. Maybe there was a future for me in politics, if purely for financial gain; I was open to any opportunity to continue living in the manner to which I had become accustomed.

I smiled. This was probably how the corruption started.

Five minutes later, I was beginning to wonder whether there had been some sort of mistake. Had I got the day right? The time? The restaurant? Of course I had, I reasoned. I was just nervous because whoever had arranged this rendezvous wasn't here yet. And because I was sitting in a place in which I doubted I personally could afford an appetiser. I'd probably used up all the goodwill I'd had with the maître d' already.

I heard the maître d's voice then, with the exact same note of welcome with which he'd addressed me. I couldn't see whomever he was talking to from where I sat, and so simply waited. There was, after all, always the possibility that it wasn't my mystery guest. But, after several words of murmured conversation, I heard the soft tread of footsteps against the carpeted floor and looked up as a man emerged from around the corner.

He was tall and slim with dark hair swept back from his face, on the very edge of being too long. There was something else about him too: something that went beyond his sleek, striking appearance, but a quality which made your gaze linger on him: a sort of vitality which drew the eye. I stood, at once certain that this was the man I was waiting for. He was the first person I'd seen all day whom I recognised. It had been a surprise to discover the identity of the smiling young man in Uncle Andrew's

photograph during my studies of the political landscape, and a far greater surprise to see him here now.

All of this passed through my head before I realised that he was apparently scrutinising me too, as though he was trying to see something other than me where I sat. In the same time that I noticed it, he seemed to become aware of it too, and he gave me a bright smile.

‘You’re Tom Barrett,’ he said. His voice was quiet and low, but there was an assuredness to him which made it clear he knew that this was as loud as he had to speak.

I nodded, still shocked at whom Uncle Andrew had arranged an introduction with. When he extended his hand towards me I shook it, and he said the words which I didn’t need to hear.

‘My name’s Julian Ashworth. I understand you’re Andrew’s nephew.’

‘That’s right,’ I said, trying to appear confident and, more than likely, failing.

His mouth twitched into a faint smile and his eyes, a deep dark blue, seemed to smile with them. ‘The maître d’ told me that you didn’t know who to expect. Your uncle’s idea of a practical joke, possibly.’

I managed a weak laugh. ‘I don’t think my uncle plays many practical jokes.’

He laughed himself: a rich, deep sound. ‘Maybe not,’ he admitted. ‘Well, there’s no point standing up to have a conversation. I think our table’s ready, if you are.’

I was hardly of a mind to refuse, so I nodded and followed him through the restaurant. A table had been prepared for us, and the maître d’ pulled out our chairs, handed out our menus and recited the day’s specials before retreating to a discreet distance. We weren’t the only customers present, but the occupied tables were some distance away, and those staff that there were remained in the background.

Julian scanned the menu briefly and laid it aside, exchanging it for a smaller paper. ‘Do you have any preference when it comes to wine?’ he asked, his eyes flickering up to look at me. I shook my head, and he regarded the selection again before laying that too on the table.

With nothing else to hold his attention, the deep blue of his eyes settled on me again. I was focused on the list of food in front of me, trying to choose something which wouldn’t seem too childish. Small chance of that on this menu: the selection was extravagant. Aware of the silence between us, I made my choice quickly and shut the menu, returning his gaze.

He remained quiet for several moments, and then looked at me afresh, as if coming to the end of a long train of thought. 'So, I take it from your reaction a few minutes ago...you know who and, I suppose, *what* I am.'

'You're the Shadow Chancellor.'

Julian nodded. 'Shadow Chancellor of Her Majesty's *Most Loyal* Opposition, which is giving us a hell of a lot of credit if I'm honest.' He smiled, displaying a sliver of pure white teeth. 'If there is any benefit to not being in power, Tom, and there are very, *very* few of them, then one at least is that you get to be part of a group known as the "Shadow Cabinet". It's a wonderfully ridiculous title. Makes it sound as though we have designs on taking over the world.'

'As opposed to just the country,' I supplied. I wasn't sure whether a witty comment was called for, or whether the comment had in fact been witty, but something about the man tugged you into making a contribution, and I doubted he'd be too impressed if I spent most of the meal in silence.

Julian's smile widened into a bright grin. 'Fair point,' he said. 'Although if it's this much trouble to get back into power in Britain, I think world domination's probably out of reach. Sometimes I feel like organising some sort of coup. It seems like the more efficient route.' He noticed me staring at him then. I couldn't help it; I'd never heard any politician speak so bluntly before, joking or not. Even Uncle Andrew's Christmas cards tended towards doublespeak and a healthy dose of spin propaganda.

Upon seeing my expression, Julian's smile became more resigned, almost self-deprecating. 'Ignore me,' he said. 'I've been talking to the Defence lot again, and they tend to rub off on you. Are you ready to order?'

I had been, but his openness had made me entirely forget my choice. Still I nodded, resolving to sneak a look at the menu as he made his own order. The maître d' was already on his way, clearly unable to hold himself back from being of service for a single moment more.

Pulling myself together, I managed to improvise a respectable order whilst telling myself not to get distracted again. Julian opted for a chicken salad first, followed by a sirloin steak, rare.

'They keep saying red meat is going to give us all cancer,' he said, handing the menu back to the maître d', 'so I try not to have it that much. This place, however,' he added, giving the man another bright grin, 'makes moderation extremely difficult.'

‘I’ll make sure the chef does his best,’ the maître d’ promised. ‘And...’ his voice tailed away slightly, as though terrified of second-guessing either the Shadow Chancellor or a customer, and certainly both at the same time, ‘has Sir given any thought to the wine...?’

‘Well, if it’s okay with my friend, I think we’ll opt for the Sangiovese,’ Julian said. ‘Call it a character flaw. Thanks very much.’

The maître d’ nodded before seeming to force himself to leave the table. Perhaps dealing with obnoxious young professionals every day meant that a little charm went a long way.

Julian turned to me again and sighed happily. ‘I have to admit, I’m very pleased your uncle came to me with this idea. Most of the time I end up working through lunch, so it’s nice to get out of the office for a while.’ He watched me for a second, and then cocked his head to the side. ‘So...exactly how much do you know about politics, Tom?’

Ah, I thought. Well, the deception was never going to last for very long anyway, but I was still grateful we’d been able to order first. Hopefully he’d still let me have some wine if my answer wasn’t what he was looking for.

Under his attentive gaze, I cleared my throat. ‘Well, I know about how the election system works, and how the Government operates: Question Time and bills and everything. And...’ I was grasping already, though keeping my exterior calm, ‘I understand the basic system of the Government, with everything split into departments and having the Cabinet meetings...’ I tailed off, preferring to die in a dignified silence than by just throwing other buzzwords out at random. I’d made that mistake at university.

Julian was nodding slowly and, when he seemed aware that no further words were about to issue forth, he laid his hands down on the table. ‘Okay,’ he said. ‘So, you know a bit about the structure, and you’ve got a bit of knowhow when it comes to the practical side of things: how it works and all that. What about ideology? Policies and that kind of thing. I mean...are you a member of any particular party?’

I shook my head. My understanding of most of the political parties was based mostly on what satire and comedy panels had told me. I’d voted Labour since I was eighteen and had joined the society at university, both out of a sense of upper-ish class guilt and the belief that voting for any party more minor was a waste.

He grinned again, looking almost relieved. 'Thank Christ: you're as-of-yet unpromised. Let me tell you, you meet some godawful young people in politics. Kids who spend most of their weekends visiting their sweet, white-haired, arthritic granny, and then who show up to the meetings, giving clever speeches about how the Government needs to take food out of their mouths: it's ghoulish. Of course,' he added, after a moment, 'that was at a Conservative Party meeting, so maybe it all makes sense.'

I managed a smile of my own. 'But you would say that, wouldn't you?'

'How very dare you,' Julian remarked, cheerfully unoffended. 'That's a job for the Chief Press Secretary, and I'd honestly rather he *didn't* call the Tories a load of granny-killers. Not when we're in power, anyway,' he said, after a moment's consideration. 'If he wants to do it now, whilst he's working for them, then all power to him. They're a strange bunch, the Civil Service. I wouldn't be too surprised.'

He caught my look of bemusement, and gave another deep, clear laugh. 'If you want to know one of the key points of politics, Tom, it's making people think things without them entirely realising that you're making them think them. And frankly that's a hell of a lot easier when you're the official Opposition, because the one thing that absolutely everyone in this country can agree with is that the Government are a bunch of no-hopers who couldn't govern a knitting circle.'

'Especially not if they'd killed all the grannies,' I said.

Julian shrugged. 'It'd probably get rid of the most troublesome elements; have you ever tried to change a seventy-year old's mind? We've been trying to get them to not vote Conservative for decades, and nothing seems to work.'

The maître d' had materialised at Julian's elbow, cradling a bottle of red wine in his arms like a new-born. He showed Julian the label, who spared it a quick glance before nodding, and then set to work on the cork in a blur of motion. He went to pour some into Julian's glass, but the Shadow Chancellor instead indicated me. 'He can try it,' he said. 'He's not a politician, so his opinion is probably more trustworthy than mine.'

The maître d' poured a small puddle of wine into my glass. This, at least, I was entirely at home with. I picked the glass up, swirling the red, viscous liquid around, sniffed at it, then took the wine into my mouth, tasted it, swallowed, and nodded. 'That's fine, thank-you.' The maître d' filled Julian's glass and then my own with just



a slight preening to his movements. I wondered what would have happened if I'd told him it had been corked: presumably seppuku.

The practice of wine-tasting, combined with my first sip of anything alcoholic that day, made me feel more comfortable, as though Julian's sphere of experience had brushed – however obliquely – against mine, and I could be confident that there were now fewer chances of embarrassing myself.

'You've been spending too much time with your uncle,' Julian commented. 'There's a man who's very serious about his alcohol.'

'To be honest, I've never really known Uncle Andrew not to be serious about anything.'

'Then you've clearly not been to the right parties,' said Julian. 'That man does the most incredible impressions whilst drunk. He's got me down to a tee, for one thing. Prime Minister too, once he's had enough of that Welsh whisky of his.'

'It didn't seem to affect him that much.'

'Then you haven't seen him drink half a bottle of it either.' The Shadow Chancellor smiled at my expression. 'Honestly, your uncle is probably the perfect politician. Incredible public face, even to his own family, a very intelligent man, and he doesn't want to be Prime Minister. Which, trust me, is the kind of thing we look for nowadays. I do hope you're not at all ambitious, Tom,' he added, giving me a grin.

'A bit,' I admitted, not quite sure why I felt ashamed to say it. 'But if it helps, I've never even thought about being Prime Minister.'

'Good. You can't have a party where everyone wants to be in the spotlight; people need to have a role and work the best they can at it.'

'So, you don't want to be Prime Minister either?' I was trying to act as professionally as possible, but it was almost impossible whilst talking to Julian. It was as though everything he said, or perhaps the way he said it, pulled more out of you.

Julian shuddered. 'Christ, no. I've seen the kind of work that goes into that job. Jeremy's Opposition Leader, and even that'd be too much for me. I just figure out the economy and try to talk him out of anything too idiotic. That's my role, Tom, most of all: I support my friend. And considering that my friend wants to be Prime Minister in the next few years, he's going to need all the support he can get, the poor bastard.'

I took another sip of wine; it was tart but rich. 'It sounds as though you don't want him to get the job.'

‘I want us to be in power,’ Julian said. ‘I think, right now, we can absolutely do a better job than the Government. And I’m certain that Jeremy’s got what it takes to be the PM, if the Party pulls itself together. But nobody steps into Number Ten and comes out of it the same. That’d happen no matter who got the job. And I don’t want to see him go through that, even if he can take it.’

I started to say something else, but then stopped, aware that I was starting to interrogate him when it probably should have been me answering questions. But Julian had noticed, and he smiled. ‘Go ahead,’ he said. ‘Questions are always a good sign.’

‘It’s just...’ I paused, wondering how best to phrase it. ‘I’ve never heard anything negative about you. I mean,’ I added quickly, ‘not that I was searching for anything. Just in general: reading up on current politicians.’

‘Ah, well,’ Julian said, ‘as for that, I haven’t exactly been in the spotlight all that much, so there’s not much point. News needs to sell, so as long as no reporters get hold of any quotes involving coups or seizing power, I tend to get along okay. No scandals. No addictions. Just a reputation for being a bit of a loudmouth in the Commons. Apart from that, I try to make a career out of being boring and effective.’ He looked at me, suddenly concerned. ‘Christ, I’m not putting you off or anything, am I?’

I shook my head. ‘It’s just odd. Uncle Andrew wasn’t this straightforward about the job.’

‘Then he’s probably smarter than I am. I just...’ Julian made a face, ‘I wouldn’t want you to get the wrong idea. You might decide that you don’t want to get into this line of work anyway, but I’d rather not misrepresent it to you. I mean...*are* you interested in having a go at this?’

His expression was so earnest, bordering on worry, that for a moment I wanted to laugh. But I remained serious, nodding. ‘I’d definitely like to learn more about it.’

‘Good,’ Julian said, seemingly relieved. ‘I thought I’d mucked all of that up for a minute: might have robbed the nation of its future Prime Minister.’

‘I thought I wasn’t supposed to want to be Prime Minister.’

Julian took another sip of his wine and gave me a brief smile over the rim of his glass. ‘You can,’ he said. ‘You just have to make sure that not many other people want to if you do.’ He eyed me for a moment longer before putting his glass down, leaning back in his chair with the air of one who had come to a decision. ‘Speaking of

newspapers and stories and scandals,’ he said, ‘Andrew mentioned an interesting incident back in your old university days.’

I resisted urge to roll my eyes, not wanting to add childishness to this scandal which had been uncovered. ‘I guess my Mum must have been talking to him.’

Julian nodded. ‘She does that, according to Andrew. No offence meant, of course.’

I shook my head, absolving him. He was, after all, completely right. ‘She definitely talked to me about it.’

The Shadow Chancellor watched me, waiting for me to continue. I took a larger sip of wine and did so.

‘I was working on the university paper,’ I said. ‘And I liked it: it was fun investigating things and interviewing people. But after the student elections, someone came to us and claimed that there had been some issues with the votes: that the count had come out in such a way that it couldn’t be right.’

I wanted to keep drinking my wine but didn’t, both to keep a clear head and to not appear the same drunken layabout my mother accused me of being. When my fellow journalist and I were approached in the pub and presented with the story, we’d not expected to find anything and had followed up on our source’s leads more out of mild interest than from thinking we’d get anything out of it. Within a couple of hours of investigation, however, it became apparent that most of what he’d told us had been factual.

I tried as best I could to condense the days of off-the-record interviews and unsavoury snooping around Rosie and I had engaged in to a few brief sentences, neither wanting Julian to pass out due to terminal boredom nor to think me either irrational or irresponsible. Still, it was a strange feeling to talk about those events with someone who didn’t have my mother’s judgemental aspect; it felt like I was finally able to place down something fragile without worrying whether it would break when I did so. It was almost a struggle to move the narrative along.

‘When we thought we had all the information we could use, we were starting to put a story together,’ I said. ‘And that was when the editor called us both into his office for a little talk. And told us to kill the story.’

‘Ah,’ Julian said, nodding for me to go on.

‘I still don’t know who told him,’ I continued. ‘My friend and I tried to keep it all pretty quiet: just between the two of us. But we told him that we wouldn’t give it up,’ I continued, and I could feel the same angry conviction I’d felt during that meeting:

the frustration of trying to argue with someone whose notions of right and wrong seemed so distant from my own. ‘All he would say is that we couldn’t run it; he never gave us a good reason. All he said was that the story wasn’t going to be published by the paper, and if we kept going with it then we could get in some serious trouble.’ I almost reached for the wine, but I stopped myself. ‘So...Rosie and I took a few days to make sure, *really sure*, that we were right. And then, at three in the morning, we put it up on the front page of the website, then changed all the passwords so they couldn’t take it off.’

Julian laughed: it was a loud, rich sound. I smiled, mirroring his own mirth even though the memory had never given me reason to be cheerful before. ‘Fantastic,’ he said, when he’d stopped. ‘Absolutely fantastic. How long before they managed to fix it?’

I shrugged, still smiling. ‘More or less the second they noticed, but that took a few hours. They killed the page, but a fair few people saw the story. Most of them told their friends; gossip gets around St Andrews pretty quickly.’

‘And did they end up looking into the election process?’ Julian asked.

I shook my head. ‘Nothing happened. People were talking about it for a couple for days, but that was it. We both had to meet up with the disciplinary committee, but I think they just wanted to us to promise that we’d not do anything like that again. I quit the paper, basically just to say that I left before they made me; Rosie actually made them get rid of her. And that was it.’

Julian nodded, the amusement starting to fade from his features; my own smile failed with it. ‘I imagine that was a very important lesson.’

I bit back my main response, which was that people in power could get away with almost anything. Instead I said: ‘If you want to make things happen then you need to be prepared to stick your neck out, and it won’t always work out.’

‘Well, there’s some truth to that,’ Julian admitted, after a short silence. ‘A lot more than there should be, anyway. But I was talking about the aftermath. People aren’t typically disposed to care and, if they do, then they don’t keep it up for very long. When a movement’s in full swing and it’s getting coverage from the media, then anyone can be a part of it. But a week or two weeks later, then anyone talking about it’s just a malcontent, a whiner or a conspiracy theorist, because then there’s something else going on, taking the mob’s attention.’

I nodded. We’d barely gotten two days.

‘Why did you run the story?’ Julian asked, suddenly.

I looked at him, almost surprised that he’d asked. I’d been interrogated on that point plenty of times already, with my mother filling the role of High Inquisitor, but Julian’s approval and enjoyment of the story had led me to believe that he completely understood.

‘You knew that there’d be a backlash from it,’ he said. ‘And you knew your editor wasn’t going to help you. So...why?’

‘Well...because it was true,’ I said, trying not to make it sound as obvious as it seemed to me. ‘We made sure that it was, and that meant that people should have been able to know about it.’

‘But what about the people who didn’t want you to? You knew that you’d have to answer to them, eventually,’ Julian persisted, leaning forward slightly. ‘What were you thinking, exactly?’

It might have been because of Julian’s demeanour, or it might have been because my mother had asked me that same question, albeit in a very different tone, and I was tired of repeating the same sanitised answers to her just to meet with her approval. Whatever it was, I decided to make a try for the truth.

‘At the time, I really didn’t know why we should do it. I mean...I wanted to do it: I thought that because it was true then it had to be put out there. But I didn’t exactly...know why I thought that. You know?’

Julian nodded, but otherwise kept looking at me. It was as if he knew that there was more to it than that.

‘But...’ I went on, feeling my way a little blindly through the thoughts, ‘when we’d actually the page up and were sitting there just afterwards...Rosie and I were talking about it. You know, I felt like it could have all happened and barely could have cared or noticed. If we’d not decided to look into it, then nobody would have known; it wouldn’t have gone anywhere. And it just felt like even if nothing was going to get done because of it, then at least everyone would *know* what had happened.’ I really couldn’t put into words what I’d felt in that moment, clinking a glass of cheap vodka against Rosie’s. ‘We thought that was at least something we could do.’

‘Of course,’ Julian said, in a tone which at least seemed to imply that he understood. But again, there was the feeling that he was leaving an opening for me, as though his comment was meant to push me to say more.

‘But when it was the editor telling us not to run the story, or the Press Officer saying the same thing, or when we were talking to the disciplinary people,’ I went on, and saw the satisfaction in his face as I did so, ‘I just kept thinking about how good it felt that they couldn’t make people *not know* about it. They couldn’t control the reaction or perception: they didn’t have control over that.’ I nodded. ‘And that made it feel like we’d done the right thing.’

For a second, maybe two, Julian watched me carefully. I made sure to return his gaze, not looking away from it.

Then he raised his glass, half-full like mine was, as if to give a toast.

‘Here’s to morality in journalism,’ he said.

\* \* \*

The rest of the meal was spent in more comfortable conversation, as though through telling the Shadow Chancellor my darkest secret I had undergone some form of confession and was pure enough to be welcomed into the fold now that one of Her Majesty’s Most Loyal Opposition had absolved me.

Julian was keen to supply with his own insights into a political career, but he spent almost as much time telling me about his life and upbringing. It became quickly apparent that there was little divide between the two: there wasn’t an experience he hadn’t turned into some lesson that he now applied to his political existence. He told me over our first course that he had been raised in a strict Catholic household, forced to attend church services multiple times a week from birth. Julian told me, not quite soberly though without any embarrassment, that he’d managed to foster a deep dislike of his parents from an early age, which had slowly become an overall disdain of the Catholic Church itself, which itself had turned into a distaste for most establishments.

‘That’s what got me into politics,’ he said, at one point. ‘I didn’t like how things operated when small groups of people held power: the potential for abuse is far too great. Sometimes it doesn’t take long; other times it can take centuries. But it happens. Take the Catholics, for example.’

A grimness had entered into his voice as he said that last sentence: the first time I’d heard that kind of edge to it. He caught my look of surprise and shook his head. ‘The hypocrisy gets me more than anything: countless children abused by an organisation that still holds itself as some bright beacon of morality. And at the end of it all, there’s no consequences: no justice. Like your university.’ He sighed. ‘And like politics. If I’m ever part of the Government, Tom, I’d hate myself if we weren’t far better than

any of them. Jeremy, thankfully, feels much the same way. And if we get into power, then we might actually have a shot at shaking things up.’ He nodded to me. ‘It’s like you said: people shouldn’t get away with things easily. There *should* be consequences. Otherwise what right do we have to make decisions?’

It was odd, sitting opposite a politician and hearing him talk so bluntly about morality. A cynical side of me felt that it was unusual for a politician to actually *have* a sense of morality. I’d presumed that Uncle Andrew had one, if only because there’d been a lack of any evidence of pure evil in the man’s life.

Still, Julian seemed to not only have a conscience, but appeared to heed its advice. It was, he told me, the one part of his relationship with the Church that he was grateful for.

‘Father Sean Donnelly,’ he said at one point, musingly. ‘An Irishman: one of the ones they’d managed to dig up from the 1800s. Used to get through more whisky than your uncle, as far as I recall. Monster of a man. Seven feet tall and an ex-boxer. I think that’s what really made him a good priest: he wasn’t afraid of confronting anything. Didn’t like weakness, either.’ He smiled. ‘He actually believed that most people could be good if they actually put in the effort, and he used to give me a clip around the head if he thought I wasn’t.’ Julian laughed, prompting a smile from me. ‘He used to tell me he was setting me an example, but whether that was an example of how to act or of what would happen if I didn’t, I don’t know.’ His blue eyes settled upon me again. ‘He should have gone into politics, not the Church. Most MPs are terrified of a full-on fight. They’d have no idea how to deal with him.’

It seemed safe to hazard a joke. ‘As long as he didn’t clip them around the head.’

Julian glanced at the ceiling for a moment, contemplative. ‘On a purely physical level, I’d agree. Metaphorically, it’s sometimes quite refreshing for the general public to see one of its servants get passionate. And if you’re able to come across on the aggressive side of offended, they seem to think you have bona fide a reason for doing so. Just take care not to call anyone a bastard in the House; the Speaker never takes kindly to that sort of thing.’

I looked at him in surprise, and he flashed me another grin. ‘Not me,’ he said, ‘or your uncle. Or, thankfully, Jeremy, although I did once bet him an entire bottle of Scotch that he would. Backed out at the last second; the entire right side of the chamber looked incredibly depressed. So did a few on the Government benches, actually. I gather word got around.’ Julian shook his head at the memory. ‘He had to buy a hell

of a lot of drinks that night, and we got emails from the PM's office for the rest of that week, asking us if that's what we called opposition.' He smiled. 'You can have a laugh, once in a very great while. Best thing is to have them and remember them during the dull times, because the times tend towards dullness. And the laughs are what people want to read about when you bring out a biography.'

I returned his grin. 'And are you going to bring one out?'

'An autobiography?' Julian recoiled in mock horror. 'Bugger that. Wouldn't even know what to call it. Jeremy's promised that I can write his, though; I won that in a bet too. Your uncle's allowed to *name* it, funnily enough. I feel sorrier for Jeremy on that score, actually. Andrew's got a list of ideas and knows more stories about him than even I do. Between the two of us, we'll never get it past the publishers.'

I barely tasted the food. My entire attention was fixed on Julian's conversation and having appropriate answers for him, even if half the time he succeeded in extracting far more from me. He had a kind of magnetism to him, something that went beyond the striking nature of his appearance and movement that I'd first noticed. It was an energy and passion which made you want to absorb his every word and left you not only believing them, but without any doubt that he himself believed them too, more deeply than you ever could. It was intensified whenever he talked about politics, which was clearly his favourite topic; it was as though a kind of light came on behind his eyes, like he'd been waiting for the subject to be brought up again since the last time. If he could feel so strongly about what he was doing, if it could give him such a spark after years of being a part of it, then it seemed as though there really could be a future for me there too.

Whilst our conversations were forever tugged gently back towards politics, we strayed onto any number of subjects such as films, literature, and wine. The last of these was a topic which was incredibly close to his heart. After draining his second glass, he confided to me that it had always been his dream to one day retire and procure the ownership of a small vineyard.

'Somewhere nice,' he said, pouring himself another drink. 'Italy, maybe, or France. Just not California. I want somewhere I can rest, drink wine and sleep in the sun. That, I think, would be a very nice reward.'

'Reward?' I asked, as he poured wine into my own glass.

'For fixing the country,' Julian answered, grinning. Despite the wine, his teeth were still white, free from any stain. I resolved to check my own in my spoon as soon as an



appropriate moment arrived. 'Sorting out the national debt, solving the migrant problems, making sure Britain isn't going to be responsible for the complete and utter destruction of the environment. I can probably devote...' he paused for a moment, thinking, 'around twenty, twenty-five more years to public service before it's either get out or break down. As long as I'm smart about it and don't become the centre of any scandals, then that's rather a lot of time in which I can get things done. After which, considering everything that I *do* hope to get done, I think I'll have earned a little comfort in my declining years. And,' he added, raising his glass in an ironic imitation of a toast, 'a hell of a lot of wine.' He took a sip, and then looked at me again. 'How about you? Do you have any plans, in the very long-term?'

I didn't quite know how to begin, so I settled for taking a sip from my own glass. Any of the answers that I could potentially give seemed unimpressive and trite. But Julian appeared genuinely interested, and there was something about his company which encouraged giving him what he asked for. Perhaps it was the openness that he himself displayed, or the lack of judgement which any of my previous answers had been met with.

'I don't really know what I want to do,' I admitted. 'Definitely not long-term; I've been having a lot of trouble knowing what I want to do over the next few years. I think that's why Uncle Andrew helped out.'

Julian smiled. 'He said it was because his sister was making a lot of noise and didn't seem to think that her son deserved a little peace and quiet after finishing his degree.'

I smiled too; I couldn't imagine the words coming out of Uncle Andrew's mouth.

'And so you've got no ideas of anything you want to do? No plans to see how journalism operates on a higher level, nothing like that?'

I shook my head. 'I think once was enough.' I sighed, contemplating the rest of my answer. Well, he'd been blunt enough in his part of the conversation: what could be the harm?

'I suppose...I want to do something that matters. Something that I can look back on and think I made a difference. 'I'd like to be remembered: I'd like there to be something people would connect with me. I don't even know what, just...*something*.' I took a drink to cover my embarrassment. The words had sounded far more childish than I'd meant them to, and the wine helped to counter that with a refreshingly adult feeling.

But Julian didn't laugh. He didn't even seem that surprised. 'I see. Well, politics might not be the best line of work for that. How many members of previous governments do you remember? And for the purposes of this demonstration, Prime Ministers don't count.'

I gave it a few seconds' thought, and then nodded in concession. He had a point.

'Exactly,' Julian said. 'And how many rulers of other nations do you remember? Aside from the ones who helped start any of the big wars?'

Again, I nodded, wondering just where the hell I'd been during most of my history lessons.

'If you're the leader of a country, or you have an absolutely staggering effect on the world, you'll be remembered. We'll never forget Hitler, Stalin, or Mussolini, but there are better things to be remembered for.' He leaned back in his chair, swirling the wine around in his glass. 'Best way would be to write a book. Less chance of a genocide, and probably a bit more money.'

'You're planning on making a difference,' I pointed out. I felt, through a slight and possibly wine-related haze, that he wanted me to try and counter his arguments. 'You said that's why you got into politics.'

'And I was telling the truth, but it's not because I want to be remembered for them. I want to get things done because it's what should happen. I don't care about being thrown a parade after it's done. Just let me get on with it: that works for me.'

It was a point of view I'd never encountered before. At university, even the most level-headed and practical people I'd surrounded myself with had been enthusiastic about their contributions standing, alongside their name, for centuries. Even though I met so many people every day who seemed, if not content, then resigned to an unmemorable role, it wasn't a perspective that I could ever have imagined having someone *advocating* to me.

And here was Julian Ashworth: Shadow Chancellor of Her Majesty's Most Loyal Opposition, who had worked hard to keep himself free of scandal, disaster, and all of the pitfalls a man in his position might encounter, who wanted to form a government with men and women just like him, who wanted to steer his own country in a definite direction, telling me that he didn't care whether or not the waves of the oncoming decades rolled over his head, leaving him forgotten.

It required, I was surprised to discover, an honest reassessment of my priorities. That wasn't the sort of thing which happened every day.

It seemed like we had sat down together less than an hour ago, but when Julian looked at his watch, it was with an expression of honest surprise.

‘Christ almighty,’ he said, raising his eyebrows. ‘It’s almost three. I have...*so many* things I should be doing right now. Tom?’ I looked up at him. ‘Don’t go into politics.’

Before I could answer, or ask if that was honest advice, he had caught the maître d’s attention with a nod. The man stepped over, his stride indicating that an army couldn’t keep him from our side. Within moments, he had ferried the bill over to us, which Julian took without consulting me, flipping open the leather wallet and placing his card over the printed sheet before even looking at the price.

Once our bill was settled, we rose from our chairs, and Julian walked me to the door. Outside, he turned to me.

‘Well, Tom, I’ve really enjoyed meeting you,’ he said. ‘I’ll get in touch with you through your uncle, and if you’re still interested in going through with this idea of his, then I look forward to that. I can’t promise you anything monumental, but I can definitely get you some experience.’

He extended a hand out to me, and I took it. Like the first time, I was struck by the strength and warmth of his grip as it enclosed my own, smaller hand. As we finished the shake, the sun crept out from behind the clouds, spreading a modest light over the streets. Julian smiled and fished a pair of dark sunglasses from out of his suit jacket, placing them over his eyes.

‘Second piece of advice, Tom?’ he said. ‘You always find yourself needing sunglasses a lot more than not.’

I was still in my state of extended off-balancedness and couldn’t think of a response fast enough. He flashed me a grin which could probably have been called roguish if it hadn’t come from a Shadow Chancellor and turned, striding up the street towards the sunlight. I turned in the opposite direction and headed down the street, the sun shining against my back.

I took the tube back home, sitting back on a seat with a faint smile on my face. When I stepped through my front door, I tried to field my parents’ questions as casually as I could (I’d learned long ago that my mother became even harder to deal with if she felt that she deserved credit for something) and made it up to my room before a true, broad grin took over my face. I then made a call to Uncle Andrew, who

seemed mildly surprised to hear from me (although he had apparently managed to lodge my name in his memory at last) and thank him for the introduction.

When I'd managed to extricate myself from the awkward politeness of a conversation with Uncle Andrew, I went over to the mirror, checking my teeth. To my relief, the wine hadn't stained them to a noticeable degree: that would have been an embarrassing discovery.

As I looked at my reflection, I thought about the opportunity I was being given, and why it had come to me. I wanted to believe that I had made a good impression, but it seemed very unlikely that I was being offered this chance on the strength of my winning personality and deep political insight.

The simplest answer, of course, was that Uncle Andrew had not only secured the meeting but also my position with Julian. And even though I was both grateful and eager for the experience and prospect, there was something in me that resented my future being so easily arranged purely by being related to someone.

Well, I thought, there wasn't much that I could do about it now. If I wanted to extricate myself from the feeling, then going forward I would have to ensure that any opportunities granted me were done so due to my own merits.

That meant I was going to have to get some.

Over the next few days, I managed to wake slightly earlier than had been the fashion over the past few weeks and catch a bus to the library. Every day, I spent my time sitting at one of the desks, surrounded by pensioners and the occasional schoolchild, taking notes from the stack of books I had gathered in front of me. I tried carry out my research in as organised a fashion as possible, although the conversation with Julian had thrown up so many points that I wanted to look into, and eventually everything I looked into seemed to shift into more and more different areas.

I made it to the end of the week before I came downstairs into the kitchen and picked up the newspaper my father had left. The news was the same blend of numb depression, separated from me by several degrees and a fair amount of money. It wasn't until I reached the sixth page that I saw something which managed to evoke not only a personal connection, but a swear word which made my mother practically break her neck turning to glare at me.

Julian Ashworth had, without explanation, stepped down as Shadow Chancellor and resigned as a Member of Parliament.

Harold Wilson's wisdom (unknown to me until two days ago) had held up once again, I thought, glumly scanning the smudged newsprint. A week certainly could be a long time in politics.

### CHAPTER THREE

This setback, to my embarrassment and my mother's disgust, led to the second period of malaise in my life, coloured with the disappointment of having come so close to starting to accomplish something with my life past a university degree, only to have that snatched away by a Shadow Chancellor's resignation. I began to think nostalgically of the days when the machinations of politicians had only affected the country; I preferred that to it actively interfering in my own life.

I began working on a novel and abandoned it days later, realising that I had no new ideas and nothing to say. I looked at the available jobs in my area, but my conversation with Julian and the possible future he had laid out had only managed to diminish any alternatives, whatever they were. I couldn't see myself as a waiter or barista after spending a lunchtime discussing political theory with a Shadow Chancellor.

What Julian's sudden departure hadn't managed to completely destroy was my interest in politics. I'd brought a stack of books back from the library before I read that fateful newspaper, and I found myself spending more and more of each day flicking through pages of theory and history, feeding an interest which grew in response.

By the time my mother called up the stairs to tell me that Uncle Andrew was on the phone, I was so absorbed in my research that it took me a moment to realise what she'd said. When her words did finally get through to me, I moved so fast that I almost tripped on my way down the stairs. I snatched the receiver from her hand, earning a dark look, and jammed the hard plastic against my ear.

'Uncle Andrew!'

There was a pause: possibly my uncle had never been greeted so enthusiastically in his life. When he spoke, there was an uncertainty to his voice. *'Oh...hello, Tom. I was just...well, I gather that you've heard the news about Julian.'*

'Yeah, I did. What happened? It came out of nowhere.'

Another pause. *'It's...difficult, Tom. That's not something that we can talk about. But the reason that I was calling was...well, there's been a development. Julian called. And he wanted to know whether you'd still be interested in working with him.'*

I frowned, not certain whether I'd heard him right. 'But...he's *resigned*.'

'Yes, he has,' Uncle Andrew said, sighing. *'Look, I think it might be easier if you were to talk to him about this. Face-to-face. Do you have any plans for Sunday afternoon?'*

My calendar was depressingly empty, as I'm sure my mother had already seen fit to inform Uncle Andrew, but I still spent a few seconds pretending to think about it for the sake of my pride. 'No...no, I'm pretty sure I'm free. Where should I meet him?'

*'Well, there's a place that Julian and I used to go...'*

\* \* \*

The place, I wasn't surprised to find out, was a bar. It was near the restaurant Julian and I had had our last meeting, and at three on a Sunday afternoon it was empty but for my uncle and the man who had once been Shadow Chancellor of Her Majesty's Most Loyal Opposition. The latter gave me a tired smile; the former seemed just as awkwardly formal in a bar as anywhere else I'd seen him, though at least he'd dispensed with the suit. He was drinking what appeared to be a Long Island Iced Tea, whilst Julian had stuck with red wine. When the waitress moved towards the table with me, I ordered a lager.

I sat down and looked at the two friends, both of whom were watching me just a shade or two under 'intently'. It was odd, seeing the two of them together: the restrained, correct and overwhelmingly grey politician sitting next to the well-groomed man with his volatile energy. I wondered how they could have ever become friends in the first place, and in what place that had been. Julian seemed to almost wear locations like a well-fitted jacket, whereas Uncle Andrew managed to appear an uninvited guest in his own study.

Finally, when neither of them seemed to be on the verge of saying anything, I asked, 'So...I was asked if I still wanted to work with you.' I nodded to Julian, who raised his glass to me in acknowledgement. As he gave me another grin, I saw his teeth were stained red.

Uncle Andrew glanced at Julian, waiting for him to answer. When that too seemed unlikely, he cleared his throat and leaned closer to me.

'This isn't...*quite* what I had in mind,' he said. 'But it seems as though Julian is, despite recent events, still going to be involved in politics. To an extent.'

Julian gave a slight snort before taking a large gulp of his wine; Uncle Andrew rolled his eyes: the most human expression I'd seen him make. He looked back at me. 'Julian is going to stand for election for local government.'

I looked at Julian, who nodded vaguely. It seemed unlikely that that was the first glass of wine he'd had today.

‘Local government?’ I asked, only a little less confused than I had been before. It was an avenue I’d not considered, but there were reasons for that. From my reading, local government wasn’t a system that people paid much attention to; it didn’t seem that there was much that local government could do that could attract any. What was Julian thinking, going from Shadow Chancellor to that?

The waitress came over, holding a tall glass of lager, causing Uncle Andrew to stop his explanation. I thanked her and waited until she’d left before asking my next question.

‘You resigned,’ I asked, ‘to go and work in local government?’

Julian shared a brief, almost irritated glance with Uncle Andrew, and then turned back to me and gave a slow nod. I looked at my uncle then, trying to catch some clue in his expression, but the man was a blank slate.

Something was going on here, and whatever it was it didn’t look like I was going to be let in on the secret.

‘I didn’t give up my seat because I wanted to sit in meetings with councillors, talking about planning permission and liquor licenses,’ Julian said, finally speaking up. ‘This is something I’m doing because I’ve got limited options, and this is the one I happen to dislike the least.’ Seeing the expression on my face, which doubtless looked no less confused, he sighed and took another sip of wine. ‘Can’t tell you any details, I’m afraid. It’s...complicated.’

Again, I looked at Uncle Andrew, who offered no more hints than he had last time. I was torn halfway between resentment at being kept on the outside of what the two of them were barely talking about, and maddening curiosity as to what it was I couldn’t be told.

‘Nothing to be done,’ the ex-Shadow Chancellor went on, glancing at my uncle as well. ‘All done now. Speaking of,’ he turned back to me, ‘I can completely understand if you’d rather work with someone who’s involved with something more prominent, or with someone who’s going to be around Westminster: I imagine that would be more convenient. But I’d be glad to have you along with me, provided I manage to get elected onto the council, although,’ he added, managing another slight smile, ‘that’s more or less being arranged anyway. And there are certain...’ he glanced at my uncle, who was watching him over the rim of his glass, ‘other possibilities.’ Uncle Andrew gave a quick shake of his head and Julian stopped talking, taking a drink instead.



For the third time, I looked at Uncle Andrew, and not just because of this new element of the secret. It was an instinct I'd developed through living with my father, and it seemed to apply to any family member. Uncle Andrew caught my look and, in another surprisingly human moment, gave me a shrug. Apparently this was going to be all my choice, which in itself was a new experience for me.

I made myself take a moment, really thinking it through. One answer would lead me into a complete unknown: whatever it was that I'd be doing, I'd never have done before and didn't know whether I could. I'd be out in the world, at least during work hours, depending on myself for the first time. The other answer would keep me static, with all of the comforts I'd never once had to work for, with my parents to support me and with day after day of not having any purpose.

I didn't even know why Julian was leaving, or what the possibilities that he'd spoken about were. I didn't know what, aside from my own relative, could have made him want to stick with me.

Looking back at Julian, who had turned his attention to what little wine remained in his glass during that exchange, I took a breath.

'I'd like to go with you, if that's alright' I said.

For a moment, it seemed as though Julian hadn't heard me, or rather that he hadn't understood me. Perhaps he simply didn't believe me. Whatever the reason, he looked at me blankly for a second, absolutely no expression on his face. But when the moment passed, a broad smile crossed over his face: the first smile he'd managed today without a trace of bitterness or self-deprecation, although his stained teeth didn't improve it. He held out his hand to me and I took it, feeling once more the power and honesty of his handshake.

Uncle Andrew, who had regarded the exchange with a kind of long-suffering indulgence, motioned politely for the waitress and ordered a bottle of Rioja with three glasses. Neither Julian, whose spirits seemed to have been buoyed, nor I protested or ascertained whether the drink was intended for a celebration or mourning. A case could be made for either side.

As we made our way through the bottle, however, as well as the one following it, my uncle managed to relax a little and became more talkative than I'd ever known him to be. Julian's recovered cheer for the most part remained intact, although during the lulls in our conversation and laughter I caught brief expressions of moroseness creep over his face, always cleared away as he looked at either me or Uncle Andrew. It was

the look of someone who wasn't just forcing themselves to be cheerful for the benefit of the people around him, but who was trying to raise their spirits and grasp onto a good mood for their own sake.

I could understand, or at least was doing the best I could to understand. The man I'd known a fortnight ago had been bright, optimistic and energetic because he'd had a purpose: something to work at that he'd be able to see in every newspaper and a mission which would drive the fate of an entire country in one direction or the other. This other man, in the same body, had in some secret way faced the loss of all that purpose and had only had his fall stopped, I had to assume, by the political machinations of some powerful friends.

Still, he was facing a far greater disappointment than I'd ever known with resilience, and he was already pushing himself up off the mat like a boxer not yet out of the fight. Part of the reason I'd said yes was based purely on that: the sheer determination and force of will he must have to keep himself afloat. The other was the secretive look which Uncle Andrew had given him, cutting the man off before I'd heard what 'possibilities' there might be for him.

The more I thought about my reasons for sticking with him, the more I was sure that I'd made the right choice. The wine probably had some tangential relationship to that feeling, but at least I'd agreed when I was sober.

It quickly became another very enjoyable afternoon, which had become an enjoyable early evening by the time I staggered through my front door. Julian's offer and my acceptance were still jangling around in my head, the details of it softened by the alcohol which had accompanied it. But, I reasoned, through a faint haze, that it had been Julian who had lit a fire under my interest in politics, even if that initial prompting had been followed by my own intense study. And, despite everything that had unfolded over the past several weeks, Uncle Andrew seemed to think that my working with Julian was still a viable option. Surely it made sense to remain, at least for the moment, by his side?

That, I decided, struggling with my clothing, would be what I would do.

The next morning, I reflected on that afternoon, whilst at the same time trying to claw my way free of the clutches of my hangover. My mother seemed unable to decide whether or not drinking to excess was still an unreasonable pursuit if the activity took place at the prompting and expense of two politicians, one of whom was her little

brother. She compromised by serving me coffee and sparkling water as an accompaniment to her usual lecture.

Just then the telephone rang. I winced at the sound, almost spilling my coffee. My mother rolled her eyes: she and Uncle Andrew obviously had more in common than I had ever thought. She picked up the receiver, spoke for about a minute, and then held it out for me.

*'Hello, Tom?'* It was Uncle Andrew. Clearly this was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

I tried to keep any remnant of my hangover out of my voice; Uncle Andrew's was as steady as could be. *'Hello, Uncle Andrew. Thanks for last night by the way.'*

*'Oh, there's no need to thank me. I had a rather nice time myself. Look, Tom, I just wanted to check whether you were still certain about Julian's offer. I know it's not quite what you were thinking when we originally talked about this...'*

*'It's fine,'* I said, and felt more certain about it as I said so. *'Honestly, I'm very interested.'*

*'Right. Well...that's good. In which case, I thought it might be a rather good idea if we started to think about the move.'*

So much for the certainty. Uncle Andrew's talent for confusing people must have been a real gift to him as a politician. *'Move? I don't...?'*

*'Ah.'* My uncle's voice wavered. *'We didn't...we didn't talk about where Julian was going, did we?'*

I tried to remember what I could about last night. I was still hazy on the details after a certain point. It seemed as though honesty was likely to be the best policy, considering I was never that convincing whilst I was hungover. *'I don't think I can recall.'*

Uncle Andrew gave a tired chuckle. *'I'm having some trouble with that too. Then I'm afraid that this might come as a bit of a surprise. Julian is going to be mostly based near his old constituency: Newcastle upon Tyne.'*

It took me a moment to get past that, and then I tried to remember everything I knew about Newcastle. I'd known people from there at university, although not many and none of them well. They had a few bridges, a river, and a couple of monuments I'd looked at during a brief flirtation with architecture. Aside from that, that there wasn't all that much I could tell you.

I glanced at my mother, who was doing her very best to listen in to the phone call whilst wiping down a counter. It might have been a little more convincing if she ever wiped down a counter when she wasn't trying to eavesdrop. I thought about the places I'd been: not on holiday or on a school trip, but to live, to be part of the community and set down some roots for myself. Once I'd counted London and St Andrews, I ran out of places.

I was going to have to fly the nest at some point. My parents, I was sure, would be just as happy for that day to come as I would be.

'That won't be a problem,' I said, feeling the excitement starting to build inside me regardless of my misgivings. 'I think I'd like that.'

Uncle Andrew sighed. '*In which case, you might want to put Amelia on the phone. It would be better if she were to hear it from me.*'

'Okay.' I held the phone out to my mother, who was already crossing the room, hand reaching for it. With her spare hand, she waved me out of the room, setting her face into a determined expression as she put the phone to her ear.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Things moved fast, though managed to do so over several months. My parents, as I'd predicted, were enthusiastic at the prospect of me starting to make my own way in the world and fully supported my working with a former Shadow Chancellor, even if the price was taking up residence in Newcastle upon Tyne.

I had my own reservations about relocating to the wild and lawless North. I'd lived in London for my entire life, not counting four years of university, and was still extremely comfortable here. Apart from one Geordie acquaintance at university, my knowledge of the region came from stereotypes, the news and anything I'd read off the back of a bottle of Newcastle Brown Ale, which I had never managed to get a taste for.

Still, if this was to be my first sacrifice in forming a political career, then it was one I was, after several hours of soul-searching and more than several glasses of wine, ready to make.

Following a number of trips up the A1 to look at apartments, however, it became clear that the North was not the frozen and anarchic wasteland that every Londoner had assured me it was. Another fact which soon became apparent was that 'making my own way in the world' was not quite the same as being financially independent. My experience here wouldn't be the type which came with a salary, so my rent would be paid by my parents, keeping their loving and semi-stifling hold on me intact for the foreseeable future. I would be living in a one-bedroom flat in Gateshead, complete with a kitchen and a living room. I'd have preferred to live in the city itself, but a friend of the family had offered this apartment at a reduced rate and Mum had put her foot firmly down. Living alone bothered me far less; I'd always done well enough without company, and my communications with both Uncle Andrew and, more sporadically, with Julian made it seem likely that I would be enjoying little enough time at my new residence.

But despite all of my resolve and excitement at starting this new chapter of my life, I still felt a sense of trepidation as we drove up the motorway for the final time. I was leaving everything I'd ever known behind. I'd made a decision which might have an effect on my life for a longer time than any other I'd come to.

I was also going to live and work shoulder-to-shoulder with Geordies, who presented a more immediate terror.

Yet once my first and last months of rent were paid, my varied possessions had been moved in and my parents had bestowed cheerful farewells on me, the front door shut, and I was left alone. Money for rent and my own survival would be paid regularly into my account, making starvation unlikely. Julian had called to say that he would be in touch next week, and until then he advised me to get to know the city we'd be spending so much time in. He'd been elected to Newcastle City Council some weeks before and had been morbidly amused by the low turnout. What had come as no surprise to him, or to Uncle Andrew, was his position as leader of the city council. I supposed that he had more experience in politics than many of the other candidates for the role, although I was more inclined to believe that certain backdoor and confidential arrangements had been a factor in that case.

I was hardly one to point fingers; that was the exact reason I was here.

With little enough to occupy my time, I decided to take Julian's advice and head into the city. There was a bus stop a minute's walk away from my house, and from there it was a short journey into the city centre. I took a window seat, gazing through the glass as my new home passed me by.

Gateshead was a mix of tattered traditionalism and enthusiastic gentrification. I watched it flash past the bus windows, my spirits drooping with every boarded-up shopfront and broken window. It certainly looked like the place could do with pulling itself together. Things got a little more hopeful as we passed the bus station, which at least looked like it had had some money put into it, plus a large square with a giant Tesco, cinema and a couple of restaurants. I suppose I should have been relieved that a section of this place had itself in order, but it was a hell of a long way from London. I was already starting to miss the place which had been, until today, home.

I still felt like a complete outsider as we crossed onto the Tyne Bridge: a great green monster of metal arches and pillars. There were several bridges on either side of us, and I could see the city now, directly ahead.

If Gateshead had been a mixture of styles, then the skyline of Newcastle was schizophrenic. Victorian towers and churches jostled with tower blocks of Brutalism, here and there interspersed with the glare of the sun catching on the metal and glass of modern offices. You couldn't see a pattern in it if you tried, and I wondered just how far ahead the architects and town planners had thought when laying out each new generation of design. Possibly they thought their visions would continue on for a great

deal longer than they had. I wondered who they were, and what could have made them think like that.

The bus sped on until it was swallowed by the confused jumble of buildings. I stayed aboard until we reached some kind of terminal, where it seemed the journey ended. I followed the crowd as they disembarked, having no idea of where they were going or where I'd end up if I walked on with them. But they seemed a lot more certain of themselves than I was, so I kept going until I saw daylight.

The corridor I was walking down came out onto a large square, filled with people and pigeons. It seemed like every kind of person in Newcastle could be found here: parents with babies, grandparents with children, teenagers in tracksuits or school uniforms, staff from the nearby restaurants out for a smoke.

I did my best to avoid eye-contact with the woman trying to sell me a *Big Issue*, walking through the square and looking for any kind of main street. There were a few contenders and much more disordered city planning: grand stone buildings shoulder-to-shoulder with metal and glass. Every so often there was another of the stubborn seventies squares that I'd spotted on my way in. It was almost like looking back through time at the city: all you'd have to do would be to omit certain buildings the further back you went.

I made a note of the square's location and name before setting off, not wanting to get lost my first time out, and then struck out into the city. As I walked around, I was able to get far more of a sense of the place and how it must have begun. That was helped when I happened upon a column, stretching what seemed like over thirty metres up into the sky. There was a man stood on top of it, though fortunately he was made from the same stone as the rest of the monument. From there, you could see how the streets stretched out from that point like spokes in a wheel, and it was a little easier to tell the new from the old.

Even if it did lack what I'd call a conventional structure, Newcastle certainly didn't seem like the kind of place you could get bored in. Cinemas, theatres, comedy clubs, bars, restaurants, a football stadium: there wasn't much I could think of that I couldn't find soon afterwards. I began to feel as though I could be quite happy here.

The people appeared to be friendlier than you tended to find in London, even when asking for any spare change, and more confident than those I'd met in St Andrews. It was a unique experience to receive a casual nod from complete strangers, and I wondered if every place in the North was like this one. Aside from train journeys to

Edinburgh where we halted for five minutes at Central Station, I'd not set foot in Newcastle before making this move. It felt like I had 'SOUTHERNER' tattooed on my forehead, although I was the only one it seemed to bother. It probably didn't help that I had my phone out most of the time, keeping track of where I was and looking up information about any buildings which caught my eye.

After a morning spent wandering the different streets, fixing interesting-looking bars in my memory and doing my best to avoid the manically cheerful youths trying to make people sign up to make monthly donations to whatever it was this week, I finally found myself facing the Civic Centre. It was easy to find: the bulk of the building was made of stained stone, most of it set with square windows. On the tallest point there was what looked like a high green crown: what my phone informed me was a 'carillon'. The whole thing looked like it could do with a good wash.

As I wandered around, things took a turn for the interesting. The first piece of incongruity was inside the square that the layout of the building formed. Over a long, murky pool, there was a quintet of bronze swans, frozen in the act of flying towards the sky.

That was fair enough, I supposed. Tastes differ.

I was far more taken aback to see the form of a muscular, semi-naked man perched on one wall, at least three times the size of a regular person. Whatever colour it had once been, it was now a bizarre blend of them: copper, green, black and most of the ones in between. I spent about two minutes staring in silence and faint awe at the giant man, wondering what might possess a person not just to sculpt something like it, but to stick in on the side of a building and then let it go to rust.

'It's called the River God Tyne.' The voice came from beside me, and I turned to see a petite, brown-skinned girl, wearing dark business attire and large pair of sunglasses. She was looking up at masonry's tribute to nudism, a speculative smile on her face.

'That's nice,' I said. 'I don't...well...it's different.'

'Big, barely-clothed guy on the side of a council building? They don't have that down South?'

'Not so much. How did you know I was from the South?'

The girl smiled, revealing brilliant white teeth. 'Accent was a clue.'

'I see,' I said, resisting the urge to check my head once again for the word 'SOUTHERNER'. 'And you'd be from here?'



‘I’d be from India. After that, I spent some time being from Ireland. Now, I’d be from here.’ She tilted her head to the side, looking me up and down. ‘So, why are *you* here? Apart from to stare at the weird architecture we have here in the North.’

‘I’m doing some work experience with the council.’ I gestured around me at Newcastle in general. ‘I just moved here, and I wanted to look around.’

She nodded, focusing back on the statue again. ‘And how are you finding the place so far?’

‘I like it,’ I said. ‘Plenty of stuff to do. Very different to London.’

‘I suppose it must be.’ The girl glanced at her watch, and then looked at me. ‘Have to run: back to work. Enjoy the nude statues.’

‘Thanks. You have a good day.’

‘There’s always a chance.’ She turned towards the Civic Centre, walking up the steps to the doors. I smiled. If she worked there, I might well run into her again.

Feeling far more kindly disposed to Newcastle, I checked my own watch: one o’clock. I weighed up the chances of bumping into Julian if I wandered the corridors of the Civic Centre and then gave up. Besides, I’d just used up all my charm with the girl, so if I ran into her again I’d be in trouble.

After a quick lunch, I continued my exploration of the city, this time looking out for any stylish restaurants. My parents had never quite worked out what a modest living was, and I suffered from the same tragic affliction.

When I arrived back outside what was now my own front door, I looked up and down the street with a slight disappointment. After all the attractions that Newcastle had had to offer, I was extremely aware of how listless and grey Gateshead seemed. A car a few feet away had a smashed windshield, and crisp and sweet packets blew over the stone pavement.

There was probably a metaphor in there somewhere, but I didn’t feel like putting in the work. I was here now, and I’d not be spending too much time on this side of the river.

I spent that evening on the other side of a firmly-locked door, eating a burned pizza whilst flipping through yet more books on politics and looking through several issues of the local papers online. I wasn’t that surprised to see that there was little enough written about the council or its activities: either nothing had been happening recently, or the people who were supposed to report on it didn’t find it interesting enough.

My week off passed slowly, interspersed with the occasional phone call from my parents to check whether I was still alive. I spent most of my days doing research or exploring the area; Julian had been elusive and, as I knew where and when we were meant to meet, calling him seemed as though it could be considered desperate.

Phone calls aside, I was probably speaking an average of twenty words to other people per day, most of which were used to explain that I didn't have any change on me. It was unavoidable, I supposed: I had moved to a new home, and the one person I knew for miles around was very much occupied with their own business. The only other connection I had made had been a short conversation about a statue which, if it had had genitals, it would have been proudly displaying, and I wasn't quite sure whether that was a promising start to any sort of association.

The week did pass, however, and before I knew it I found myself putting on one of several suits I'd brought up to the North East with me, feeling suddenly nervous about what I was about to get myself into. Even with all the reading I'd done, I still couldn't help but think myself extremely unqualified for council work. Who knew what I'd be asked to do? Would I be able to maintain the illusion of competency for long enough to actually learn something? Julian and my uncle seemed to think so.

I rode the bus into town and made my way through the streets to the Civic Centre. I was to wait in the lobby for Julian, who I hoped would eventually put in an appearance. Otherwise, I would most likely remain in the lobby until I left for a bar out of sheer embarrassment.

I was sitting in the waiting area, after assuring the receptionist for the third time that I was perfectly happy to wait, when Julian emerged from around a corner, grinning as he spotted me.

'Tom!' he said, striding towards me. I stood, shaking his outstretched hand. 'You made it here alright, then. What do you think of the city?'

'I like it,' I said. 'You realise that someone's stuck a barely-clothed giant man on the outside of your place of work, right?'

'I take it you're referring to the River God Tyne sculpture? One of the better-known pieces of art around this great city?'

'I've heard that it's called that,' I said. 'It's still an odd thing to see.'

'Well,' Julian said, 'as much as I appreciate the exterior design advice, remodelling the outside of a pretty functional building is fairly low on the list of things I got into

politics to do. Speaking of,' he motioned towards the door he'd emerged from, 'let's go to work.'

'Work' seemed at first to be a generous description. As it was, our first half an hour was spent walking through the corridors, with Julian showing me around and making sure that I got to grips with the council system. On the occasions that I was shown into offices, most of the people inside already seemed to be familiar with their new commandant and he was quick to introduce me.

After thirty minutes, I was finally beginning to understand how much work went into running a city. Perhaps to Julian it might have seemed small-scale, considering he had been planning to shape the nation's economy, but the sheer number of employees under my new mentor was dizzying. People were in charge of housing, of licensing businesses, of waste disposal, recycling, trading standards: all of the departments necessary to making a single city run as smoothly as possible all ran, eventually, back to Julian.

When I mentioned this to him, he laughed. 'It's not like I've got to micromanage everything. If you're going to be a good leader, then you need to look at the big picture. The more detailed you get, the lower down the chain of command you go. I just choose the direction and sit on a lot of committees.'

'And how do you know which direction to take?'

'Necessity's got a lot to do with it,' Julian said. 'Austerity's starting to bite around here, what with the lack of funding we're getting around here. Not surprising: the Government's going to be more concerned with keeping their marginal seats safe, not wasting cash on trying to gain support from a Labour stronghold.'

'It's bad?' I asked.

Julian nodded. 'We're facing having to make more cuts. And your man here gets to decide what essential public services are the least important, not counting the ones we've already had to slash funding for.' He sighed. 'They had to make cuts to the police force, which of course has led to a big rise in the crime statistics. Not like you can blame the police for not having enough people to cover the area effectively. So, council tax rises so the forces aren't in debt, and aren't residents just *thrilled* about that.'

'And now there'll be more cuts on top of that?'

'About thirty million's worth. Still, if certain developments pan out the way they seem to be, there could be light at the end of the tunnel for the North East. Not to

mention a hell of a lot more money and a bit more over control over how things are run around here.'

I was all ears now. This sounded very much like what Uncle Andrew had stopped him from talking about earlier, and anything my family tried to hide from me was something I desperately wanted to know about. 'What are you talking out? I thought local government was...' I hesitated, trying not to insult Julian on the subject of his new job, '...it had more local responsibilities.'

Julian smiled, clearly realising what I'd been trying not to say. 'There's going to be some changes around here; I was told about them before...I decided to take this job.' His own hesitation was noticeable, considering how rarely I'd heard him stumble or have to take time over his words. 'Have you heard anything about the devolution decision?' he went on. 'The North East Combined Authority?'

I nodded. This, at least, I had read about during my more recent research. The Government had been pushing the idea hard recently, although I'd tried not let that affect my opinion of it. Some of the ideas had already been implemented successfully; others, such as the Northern Powerhouse scheme, seemed to have been regarded with open cynicism, not helped by many of the industries involved being relocated back to London. This, along with other examples, had made devolution seem like not much other than an empty word.

'Preparations are already taking place,' Julian said. 'It's happening. Less power centralised in London; smaller communities having more of a say in what's going to happen. And, if what seems likely does happen, then North East will be able to have more of a hand in its own determination and it'll need someone to be in control of that: a Mayor of the North East. And that's what I plan on being.'

That fit several pieces of the puzzle into place. It explained why Julian had come here, and it certainly made the position one in which someone could get things done: exactly the sort of role Julian preferred. It wasn't, of course, an offer tempting enough to make one drop the job of Shadow Chancellor. I'd not given up hope of discovering what had happened: I'd always liked mysteries.

Before I could ask Julian how he planned to become Mayor of the North East, the doors to the end of the corridor opened and a cluster of council workers were approaching us, smiling in greeting at their leader. Julian raised a hand in greeting, returning their smiles. 'We can talk more about it later,' he said. 'There'll be some informative and complicated documents I can send you, but we've still got things to

do today. We're going to be making cuts to refuse collection, so we can look forward to everyone having their own compost pile in their backyards.' He managed to say this in a flippant enough tone, though his quick grimace hadn't been hard to catch.

From planning a country's entire economy to taking money away from binmen in about two months, I thought as I followed him. Not the kind of thing which looked good in a political biography.

The rest of the day passed quickly enough. Julian had to meet with several other councillors. Many of the conversations involved bringing him up to date on the progress of projects or cases: what needed money and, more often, what was not going to be getting money any more. It seemed Julian was still being brought up to speed on everything that was going on in his new domain and wanted to do so as quickly and completely as possible. I stayed by his side throughout these, trying to keep up with the details that he was being given.

These conversations kept him busy, and whenever Julian wasn't talking to people face-to-face, he was answering emails on his phone as I took notes, made pots of coffee and tried to implement some sort of filing system upon the rainforest's worth of papers filling his desk. The energy of the man was as impressive as ever: he seemed to bounce from one interaction to another, gaining momentum with every change. Whatever his ideals or political loyalties, he seemed to have a flair for taking charge. It was something I'd noticed in him when we'd first met and on the following occasion: it was his refusal to allow circumstances to knock him back, even when being warned that the city's finances would be taking a hell of a hit. His forward motion was seemingly unstoppable.

By the time the day was finished, I was exhausted simply from following Julian around. When I mentioned this, he laughed, shaking his head. 'Ah, the work ethic of the young. Good thing we didn't have you lot trying to get us through the wars.' He checked his watch. 'Anyway, it's high time I headed off. I'm meeting an old friend for dinner.' He hoisted his jacket off a chair, slipping it on. 'Any plans tonight?'

I shrugged. 'I might get a drink. I don't really know anyone here.'

'Well, if the nightlife of Newcastle hasn't changed, then I'd say it's fairly likely you'll know some people by tomorrow,' Julian said. 'Just try and keep yourself under control. You don't need to rack up any scandals just yet.'

The only scandal I'd ever been involved in had involved a university newspaper, but I didn't bother arguing: it was good advice.

We parted ways outside his office, and I made my way down the main staircase. Most of the council employees were on their way out too, several of whom nodded a goodbye to me. I was getting more and more used to acknowledgement from people I didn't know. As I was heading towards the front doors, however, I saw someone who I recognised: a short, dark-haired girl walking just ahead of me.

Without really thinking about what I was doing, I sped up my walk, reaching the doors at the same time as her and holding it open for myself when it started to close behind her. She turned, surprised.

'Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know there was anyone there.' She looked at me for a moment and then nodded, recognising me. 'I see. Back for more architecture?'

'Afraid not,' I said, falling in step beside her. 'Work experience.'

'Ah,' the girl said, still walking briskly away from the Civic Centre. 'Well, lucky you. I was just doing work.'

'Really? What is it you do?'

'I'm on a grad scheme,' she replied. 'Paralegal: commercial, planning and property.'

'Sounds interesting.'

'No,' she said, in a neutral tone. 'No, it does not. What it *is* is extremely useful, and for that I can probably deal with being extremely bored for most of my day.'

I smiled. 'I guess you didn't say that when they interviewed you.'

'Well, I want to be a lawyer when I grow up. The truth didn't seem all that important.' We both turned a corner, passing under the shadow of the cathedral. 'Anyway, that's the short version of my life story,' she continued. 'What about you? What sort of work experience are you doing?'

'I'm shadowing Julian Ashworth,' I said. 'But I'm not exactly sure what exactly I'm supposed to be doing. Learning about politics, I guess.'

'And you came all the way up here from London for that?' Her tone was sceptical, and I couldn't blame her. Hearing it said back to me, it sounded a little ridiculous.

'Well, originally it was going to happen in London, but...' I shrugged, 'now he's here and so am I. I'm not sure what happened; no-one told me.'

She looked at me for a moment, eyebrow raised. 'I suppose going from Shadow Chancellor to leader of Newcastle City Council is a bit of a descent, career-wise. I was wondering if there was a story behind that.'

I didn't answer and, a few seconds later, she dropped the eyebrow, smiling faintly. 'Fair enough,' she said. 'I'm not nosey. Although I now assume that you're a disguised journalist, here to find out what actually happened.'

I laughed, shaking my head. 'Journalism and I don't mix well. He seems like an interesting man, and he apparently doesn't mind me being around.'

We walked for a few moments in a comfortable silence, before I spoke again. 'My name's Tom, by the way. Tom Barrett.'

'Sonia Malik. Nice to meet you, Tom.' She stopped to hold out a light brown hand, and we shook. When we both let go, she continued to walk, and I kept up with her.

'So,' I said, 'any good places to get a drink in Newcastle?'

'We might have one or two,' Sonia said, her voice heavy with irony. 'What are you looking for? Pub? Bar? Club? Student union?'

I shuddered. 'Not the last two. Somewhere you can sit down and not go deaf.'

'Newcastle might not have been the best place for you to have moved to.' She took a moment, thinking. 'I'm not in until ten tomorrow. As long as we're not out too late, I could show you a couple of decent places. If you wanted.'

The offer took me by surprise, and so it was several seconds before I could formulate a response. 'That...that would be great. Thanks very much.'

Sonia shrugged, but still smiled. 'I could do with a drink: long day of researching planning permission precedents.'

'But extremely useful, right?'

'It'd better be.' She stopped again, checking her watch. 'Right, I'll get home and get myself turned around. I'll meet you here —' she pointed at the Metro station beside us '— at eight thirty?'

'Works for me,' I said. 'I'll see you then.'

Sonia gave me a nod, and then headed into the station. I waited until she was gone and then turned away, continuing on towards the bus stop.

Well. It wasn't a date, but it was almost certainly better than drinking alone.

By the time I got home I had about three hours, so I took the opportunity to get a bit of cleaning done, something I'd so far avoided since moving into the place. Seeing Julian do his best impression of a political dynamo made me feel a little guilty about putting my feet up until it was time to leave the flat again. Two hours later, I showered, dressed, and headed back into the city.

My first thought at seeing Newcastle after dark was that Julian was absolutely right: the people of this city were extremely social. Crowds were gathered around the front of every single bar, shouting, laughing and singing. I'd passed two hen parties before I reached the Metro station where Sonia and I had arranged to meet, the latter of which I crossed the street to avoid after hearing the lyrics to their song. It seemed like the only way I'd survive.

Sonia was already at the agreed-upon spot, watching that same hen night with a rueful smile. 'Welcome to Newcastle,' she said, nodding at the approaching women. 'Don't let them spot you or Julian will need a new assistant.'

'It's a bit...' I struggled for words, something which Newcastle was really making a habit, '*full on*, isn't it?'

Sonia grinned. 'Not like this down in London, then?'

'Not exactly like this, no.'

'You'll get used to it. Come on, I know a place we can start.'

The place turned out to be a cinema. I glanced at Sonia, surprised. 'Change of plan?'

'Nope,' she replied, pointing at the windows next to the front door. There was a café attached to the cinema, with doors of its own opening out onto the street. With the fractured singing of the hen night getting closer, I pushed the door open, letting Sonia pass in front of me, and stepped into the café.

Our first drink of the night was a Frangelico, something I'd never drunk by itself before and hadn't known you could. But Sonia had ordered two and had also paid, so I wasn't in any mind to argue. Besides, it tasted good.

'So,' she said, once we were sat down. 'What have you been up to today? You said that you weren't clear on what you were doing.'

'I'm not, really,' I admitted. 'I'm here because I started to get interested in politics, and I got interested in politics because I was more or less pushed into it by my family.'

'Wow,' Sonia commented, raising her glass for a sip of liqueur. 'Most parents try and push their kids into becoming doctors; at least that's my national stereotype. What's with the political aspirations?'

'My uncle's an MP,' I said. 'That probably had something to do with it: they had a man on the inside.'

'Ah. Family connections. Very political.'



I smiled. 'Trust me, that's nowhere near how low my parents would sink to get me working. But I got really interested in politics after meeting with Julian. And so I thought it would be an idea to stick with him: see what I can learn.'

'Makes sense,' Sonia allowed. 'So, nurturing plans for a premiership? Tom Barrett, Prime Minister?'

'I've been told that I shouldn't aspire to that sort of thing: makes people tense. Besides, being PM seems like a lot of work. What about you? Why paralegal...ism?'

'Like I said, I want to be a lawyer,' she said, in a matter-of-fact tone. 'I've done a degree in law, but right now it's hard as hell to get on a pupillage. So, rather than just going for it, I wanted some more experience: something to make me stand out a little. Then hopefully I can start making some real money.'

'Doing what area of law?'

She made a face and took another drink. 'Well, finance and corporate law is where the big money is, but it's probably the dullerest thing you could ever find yourself doing to make cash. Criminal law's more interesting, but they pay you less for prosecuting murder than for helping to arrange one. Family law pays better than that, but I imagine that working with abused kids could probably get you down after a while.'

'I imagine it could.'

'So, I'm still making up my mind on that score,' she finished. 'But whatever it is, what I'll get paid is going to be a factor.'

'Very sensible.'

Sonia tilted her head, looking at me. 'Do you think so? Whatever happened to doing the thing you loved and it never being work?'

'I don't think that's really possible, unless you're extremely lucky. But doing what you want to do should be worth something.'

She watched me for a moment and then put her drink back down. 'Your family's very wealthy, aren't they?'

Once again, she'd taken me by surprise. 'Sorry?'

'It makes sense: family connections to someone like Ashworth, who absolutely *is* wealthy; you don't seem that worried about money; you had a rather nice suit on this afternoon, though don't let that last one go to your head. I'm right, aren't I?'

There didn't seem much point in lying to her. Besides, whilst I'd never revelled in my family's money, I'd never been outright ashamed of it either. I nodded. 'I don't know the exact amount. I've never asked.'

‘I wouldn’t either.’ She looked at me over the rim of her glass. ‘I didn’t mean anything by it, you know. I just wanted to know if I was right.’ She glanced outside, and then drained the rest of her Frangelico. ‘You want to move on?’

I’d barely touched my drink, but I’d put myself in Sonia’s hands tonight. I finished the liqueur in one long sip. ‘Sure. Where are we going next?’

‘There’s a place just down here.’

This place was a more conventional bar. There were a number of people inside, but it was hardly as crowded as some of the other venues had looked. Once inside, we ordered a couple of red wines and took a seat. The place was classy enough: big windows, oak furniture, and a cocktail menu which rivalled *War and Peace* both in terms of length and references to vodka. Sonia scanned the list briefly whilst sipping her wine.

‘Planning the next one already?’ I asked her.

‘I’ve spent the day researching compulsory purchase orders. Don’t judge me until you’ve walked a mile in my shoes.’ She glanced down at our feet, comparing them. ‘And don’t ever let me catch you wearing my shoes.’

‘Absolutely not planning on it,’ I said. ‘So, the council’s planning on seizing property?’

Sonia shrugged. ‘I’ve no idea; I do the work they put in front of me and hope like hell I get a decent reference.’ She paused, thinking. ‘And the money, of course.’

‘You’re saving up for something?’

‘Paying my rent. And, you know, food. Clothes.’ She raised her glass, ‘Wine. Whisky. I have my passions.’

I looked up at her with a new interest. ‘You like whisky?’

‘When I can get it. My Dad’s got a collection, and I used to steal the odd nip every once in a while. Had to make sure Mum never found out. She still thinks I’m her little angel.’

I grinned. ‘I did the same thing, but I think my folks were mostly okay with it. They never seemed to have time to drink it, anyway.’

We passed some time speaking about our families and upbringings. We had, I was amused to find, rather a lot in common: we had both been brought up in a similar fashion (our mothers’ strictness forcing us to adopt a rather roundabout relationship with both rules and honesty), had both had somewhat dissatisfactory love lives (neither

of us went into much detail on that score) and both of us had a desire to make something of ourselves (Sonia at least was more focused than I was on *how* to do that).

By the time we'd finished our wine, there seemed to be a warm glow about the room. Sonia gave the cocktail menu another glance and then turned to look at the large shelf of bottles behind the bar.

'How about making the next one a whisky?' she said.

I nodded, following her as she moved towards the bar. She gave the shelf a once-over, and then nodded to the barman.

She put a note on the bar and turned to me. 'Trust me to order for you?'

'If you're paying, I guess it's only fair.'

'Smart man.' She gave her order, which I missed, to the barman, collected the drinks he served and then turned to me again. 'Come on,' she said, starting to move off, 'there's a better place to drink this.'

I walked after her. 'You don't really stay in one spot for very long, do you?'

'I stayed in Ireland for fifteen years,' Sonia shot back. 'That was long enough.'

Whatever retort I was framing was lost as we moved through a doorway, stepping into what seemed for all the world like a small library. A fireplace was set in one wall, with red leather couches and low-lit lamps adding to the feeling that, whatever this place was, you weren't wealthy enough to drink there.

Thankfully, a fair amount of my upbringing had been spent drinking in places which tried their best to broadcast that message, and Sonia seemed to be blessed with enough self-assurance that it didn't bother her. We sat together on one of the settees, close enough that our arms were just touching. That didn't seem to bother her either.

She handed me the whisky, nodding at it. 'Try it. See how your rich and cultured tastes handle that.'

I took a sip, which turned out to be a mistake. It tasted like someone had put their cigarette out in it. I managed to refrain from making a face, but she still noticed, and grinned.

'A little rough, right?'

I swallowed, allowing myself the luxury of a cough. 'Just a little. What the hell is this?'

'It's an Ardbeg. Twenty-five years old. Bourbon barrels and peated malt, hence the sweet and mature tastes.'

'And the bit where it tastes like it was aged in a smoker's lung?'

‘The bourbon.’ She took a sip herself, face expressionless. ‘I suppose it takes practice.’

‘I’m up for some practice, but I think I’m going to have to pick the next one.’

Sonia took another drink, sighing happily. ‘Once you finish that one, philistine.’

We sat in a companionable silence for a while: me struggling with my whisky, Sonia giving every sign of enjoying hers. After a while, the spirit’s effect did seem to lessen, although I was perfectly willing to believe that it had managed to commit genocide on most of my taste buds. When I finally managed to conquer the double measure, I immediately rose to find something with which to wash my mouth out.

That something turned out to be a double Jameson, and I took a drink of it with a feeling of genuine relief, sliding hers across the table. She sniffed it, sipped it, and then nodded.

‘Not bad,’ she said. ‘Doesn’t quite have the upfront and honest personality I look for in my alcohol, but it’s alright.’

‘It’s Irish: Jameson.’

She snorted. ‘Fucking cheapskate. I thought you were part of the land-owning gentry.’

‘My family probably used to oppress the Irish way back when. Seems only fair.’

‘They’d have oppressed the Scottish as well, but you turn your nose up at an Ardbeg.’

The bickering continued, both of us making headway through our drinks as we argued, gradually dissolving into quiet laughter. There was something about Sonia which, like Julian, encouraged openness. In her case, however, it was more the sense that there was no need to try and impress her, whereas most of my honesty with Julian came from a need to put yourself out there, even if it was only by reacting to what he said or did. It was a relief, for one of the few times in my life so far, to feel such a lack of expectation.

We worked our way through another couple of whiskies, both of us cheerfully disparaging the other’s choice of brand (although a shaky truce was reached on the quality of a twenty-five-year-old Macallan), until the clock showed eleven-thirty, and it seemed like it was a good time to start for home.

On the basis that I was still new in town, Sonia walked me to the bus station. Both of us were slightly unsteady on our feet, with a tendency to start laughing perhaps

more than was usual, but we stayed upright before we were able slump down on the hard metal chairs.

‘This was fun,’ Sonia declared, after a short while. ‘I don’t get to go out all that much.’

‘What about your friends?’ I asked. ‘You don’t go drinking with them?’

‘They all left. Went off to university and never came back; everyone I went to uni with went back home. And now I’m in Newcastle.’ She shrugged. ‘It’s sort of weird: all of a sudden, everyone’s gone, and I’m stuck in a room with some middle-aged women.’

‘Which is better than middle-aged men.’

‘Less threatening, certainly,’ Sonia conceded. ‘But still. It’s been good having someone to drink with. Even if they do have a godawful taste in whisky.’

A neon yellow bus swung into the bay, its lights shining in on us. Sonia glanced out at it and patted me on the leg. ‘This is you. Try to get off before Durham. Hope you’re not too hungover tomorrow.’

‘And the same to you.’ I stood, a little wobblier than I had been when I’d sat down, and moved over to the bus. When I turned to look around, Sonia was already halfway out of the station and I lost sight of her as I turned a corner.

I collapsed into a seat, not trusting myself to make it down from the upper floor. As the bus pulled off, I watched the city of Newcastle pass by the windows, still alive with electric light, and I thought about the week I’d spent here.

Between Julian and Sonia, it seemed as though things would stay interesting.

## CHAPTER FIVE

When I first woke up, I thought I might have managed to duck any of the aftereffects of last night. It wasn't until five minutes later, when I tried to stand, that I realised my mistake, and the hangover hit me so hard and fast that it should have left a crater in my bedroom floor. I stumbled into the kitchen and managed to make a pot of coffee whilst relying on the wall to hold me up.

After a shower, most of the coffee and a jug of iced water, I felt just about up to stepping outside. This, it turned out, was my second mistake of the day, but I powered through, hoping that I was going to be able to field a bacon sandwich somewhere along my route.

About half an hour and one sandwich later, I was walking into the Civic Centre, doing my best to avoid – to my mind – the accusatory gaze of both the receptionist and the naked, wall-mounted man before mounting the stairs, urging myself on to the top. By the time I'd reached Julian's office, I felt almost normal again.

Julian grinned when he saw me, laying a slim sheaf of papers down on his desk. 'Ah, the man from the South. How was your wild night on the town?'

I grimaced, and he laughed. 'Looks like you found some of the right places. And what's this I hear about you spending an evening with one of our bright young lawyers of tomorrow?'

'How do you know about that?'

'You were *seen*,' he said, mock-gravely. 'Don't go for drinks together in Newcastle if you're not willing to be recognised by your co-workers. *Especially* don't go on a date.'

'I don't think it was a date,' I admitted. 'It was more of a friendly introduction to the town.'

'I see.' He pushed himself up out of his chair, stretching his arms out before putting on his jacket. 'None of my business, of course. Although, from what little information ever gets back to me, there's been glowing reports about that young lady, so I'll just assume you could do far worse. Anyway, we've work to do. Come with me and try not to throw up on anyone.'

I followed him out of the office, still wincing under the hallway lights. Julian's stride was long and powerful, and it was all I could do to keep up with him.

'You seem enthusiastic,' I said, hopefully sounding more eager than I felt.

‘Things are moving,’ he said, happily. ‘Durham held an informal poll about the devolution question: taking the soundings and making sure that they were acting in good faith, etc. And about sixty percent of who responded did so in a very positive manner. That’s a good endorsement for the scheme, and it’s made a few people who might not have been overly enthusiastic pay a bit more attention. Now,’ he clapped his hands together, ‘we’ve got to get to work. Make plans.’

‘Plans for what?’ I was having trouble keeping up, both mentally and physically: the more excited Julian got, the longer and more energetic his stride, and I was hardly operating at a hundred percent.

‘Well, first of all, we need people to be aware that devolution’s happening, because not a single person in this place knows about anything that local government tries to do.’ He fell silent, stepping aside to let a man in a suit pass him by, then continued. ‘We’re not going to bother with a survey or referendum or anything like that, but we want people to know. We want them *engaged*. This is their devolution: it’s being done *for* them and it should be done *with* them as well. We need to let them know what it’s going to be possible to accomplish, why they should be excited and get involved.’

‘Sure,’ I said, ‘but do you think they will? It’s local government: not like people get excited about that sort of thing. Present company excepted,’ I added, catching the look he gave me.

Julian grinned. ‘It’s a fair point,’ he said, ‘if mildly defeatist. In a perfect world, everyone would know, and we’d have a lot of enthusiasm and participation. We’re not dealing with that, but we can at least try and let them know what’s going on. They’re going to have to vote for their Mayor in a year, as long as all things proceed well. They should know what they’re voting for, at least.’

I nodded, impressed by his own enthusiasm, if still mildly defeatist. Put Julian in a town hall and have him talk to the locals about devolution, I thought, and they’d probably riot if someone tried to stop it. ‘That’s a year away, though,’ I said. ‘Apart from letting them know what’s happening, what else is there to do?’

‘Well, we can start looking at ways we can invest the money that we’re going to be given. Newcastle’s got a lot of deprived areas, outside of the city centre, plus some of the worst employment in the UK. The first thing we can do about that is creating industry and jobs. And we need to make sure that they’re the right kind of jobs: places where people will want to work and places that can benefit the area too, so we can turn Newcastle, and the North East, into somewhere the country could be really proud of:

seriously put it on the map. But before that, we've got to plan: plan everything and make sure that it's all going to go smoothly. Trust me, Tom, when I tell you that everything in the world that ever went wrong ends with someone saying, "Oh, we never thought of that".'

He pushed through a door with gusto, his enthusiasm dragging him forward so forcefully that he almost forgot to hold it open for me, catching it at the last second.

'The one element of this whole thing that they'll definitely have involvement with,' he went on, 'is the election of the Mayor of the North East. So at the very least, whatever else happens, we're going to have to make sure they know they need to vote for someone.'

Hungover or not, I could at least keep up with his conversation. 'Which you hope is going to be you?'

'It's definitely Plan A,' he affirmed. 'But that's going to take a lot of work. For one thing, it's a position that's going to attract a fair few candidates. One's already announced his candidacy already: some businessman who's gone rogue from the Tories. He's standing as an independent, which I have to admit is a smart move.'

'I'm guessing there'll be others too,' I said. 'Who else will end up going for it?'

Julian dwelled on this for a moment. 'Interesting question. There'll be other business leaders who'll think that this is an opportunity to steer the region in a positive direction for their industries. There are a few political figures who'll get involved too, I imagine. If you're the Crime Commissioner of the North East, you might just think that being Mayor's a bit of a step up. Not sure about the MPs in the region; there's some rumours that there are some thinking of trying out for Mayor in the other devolved regions. Somewhere like Manchester isn't going to want to take a gamble on who ends up running the show.'

'And the other council leaders will be going for it as well.' It seemed obvious that if Julian was in a position to try his luck, the others would be too.

A wry smile crossed what part of Julian's face I could see. 'That's what makes the question so interesting. You see, not everyone's that keen on having a Mayor, or at least not the sort who gets elected and has real power.' He shook his head. 'It's been a real sticking point for some places, which is bizarre when you think of what they're getting in return.'

I couldn't understand. 'Then why's the Mayor thing such a sticking point?'



‘Well, for one thing, it’s a very Tory idea, even I’ll admit,’ Julian said. ‘And Labour’s never done brilliantly in mayoral elections either, so that’s another little worry. I suspect their main fear is that it’ll be a way for a Conservative, or for an independent candidate who might as well *be* a Conservative, to sneak in: suddenly the Tories have one of their own holding an awful lot of power in a Labour stronghold. Wouldn’t look great, would it?’

I shook my head, but only slightly. I had a sudden suspicion of the real reason Julian had been sent here. ‘So...if they need to have a Mayor to get devolution...’ I said slowly, ‘then Labour wants a candidate who they think will win it?’

Julian grinned. ‘It’s a gamble,’ he said. ‘Some council leaders might argue that it’s safer not to have devolution rather than risk a Tory setting up shop. Me? I’d trade a Tory Mayor for nine hundred million pounds of investment.’ He shrugged. ‘Still, anyone pushing a Mayor might not be too popular around here.’

‘So they’d best win?’

He nodded. ‘They’d best.’

He led me through several more corridors into a conference room. Several people were already there: some I recognised as councillors; others I hadn’t seen before.

Julian made the introductions quickly, and we sat down. The meeting, as it turned out, was about the ways in which awareness of the approaching devolution referendum might be maximised. Those in the room who I had not recognised were members of a PR firm, hired by the city council to undertake this task.

There were long discussions about the best means of spreading the message, complemented by several debates over the effectiveness of each method, and it was my job to take notes on whatever points were raised and keep track of decisions reached. Julian remained bright and optimistic through it all, though seemed more interested in hearing what others around the table had to say than leading the discussion. When they spoke, he listened with almost rapt attention, as though to absorb all they had to say. I did my best to concentrate on the details, though I had to admit that the excitement of planning a campaign to inform people about a regional political process was slightly lost on me. If they wanted people to pay attention and get behind them, they should have simply proclaimed Julian King of the North and had him sack Watford Gap service station. Posters and adverts in the local paper lacked a certain flair.

The meeting went on for an hour and a half, by which time any trace of my headache had long since evaporated and my handwriting had gradually improved in legibility. When the discussion had finally drawn to a close, everyone who had been a part of it seemed to be satisfied, if also cheerful at the prospect of being able to leave the room.

Julian and I were almost at his office when he suddenly stopped, meaning that I went on walking for two paces before realising that he was no longer beside me.

‘What is it?’

He took a deep breath, and then looked at me. ‘Just building up some courage and patience,’ he said in an undertone.

I looked up, towards where we’d been walking, but saw nothing except a rotund man in a light grey suit.

‘Because of him?’

Julian nodded, breathing in once again, and then started walking forward, letting a bright smile wash over his face. ‘Ken!’ he called, in what seemed to be a genuinely hearty tone. ‘What brings you here?’

Ken turned, showing a heavy, balding face, decorated by a small pair of spectacles. ‘Julian,’ he said, his deep voice rough with the Geordie dialect. ‘I came here looking for you.’

Julian reached the larger man, holding a hand out to him which was pumped vigorously before being given back. ‘Well, you’ve found me. To what do I owe the pleasure?’

Ken’s small eyes flickered towards me; Julian placed his hand on my shoulder. ‘Tom Barrett, meet Ken Johnson,’ he said. ‘MP for Newcastle East and Chair of the Child Poverty Commission. Ken, this is Tom: he’s working with me until he decides that anything’s better than politics.’

Ken’s hand came out again, engulfing mine before jerking it robustly up and down. ‘Ah, don’t listen to the posh lad, here,’ he said, with a grin at Julian. ‘You can do alright in public service, I’ve always found.’ He released my hand, turning his attention back to Julian. ‘Now, I came down here to talk to you about the NECA. You’ve heard the latest news, haven’t you?’

‘I wouldn’t be a very good city council leader if I hadn’t.’

‘And you know the bastards are saying there’s got to be a Mayor?’

‘Tory bastards, Ken,’ Julian said in a conciliatory tone. ‘*Our* bastards would have made a far better policy, and twice as quickly.’

‘Hah!’ Ken’s chin wobbled as he laughed. ‘Well, anyway, that’s what we’re looking at now: Mayor of the North East. And that’s what I was coming to talk to you about.’

‘You’re thinking of putting the name of Ken Johnson forward for consideration?’

‘I can’t deny I’m considering it,’ Ken said. ‘I mean, if we’ve got to have one, it had better be one that the Labour population of the region can rely on. Someone familiar with the area and with its best interests at heart: not someone calling themselves an independent, getting all their instructions from Cameron and Osborne.’

Julian nodded slowly. ‘I suppose it would be,’ he said.

‘So, you know, I just thought I’d pop by and let you know: on the quiet, like. Never too early to start building up a support base, eh?’ He held up a pair of large, pale hands, shaking them dramatically. ‘Don’t give me an answer just yet. I know you like to think things over. But there’d be a bloody lot we could be getting on with, if we started working on it sooner rather than later. I’d want you there with me, of course.’

Julian gave him a smile, nodding again. ‘I understand completely, Ken. I’ll give it some real thought, I promise.’

‘All I ask. Oh, on the subject of local matters,’ he went on, as though he’d only just remembered, ‘I hear there might be some trouble with the refuse collection. Their union’s saying you’re going to cut about forty jobs. That true?’

Julian coloured, but his tone was as polite as ever. ‘There’s nothing set in stone,’ he said smoothly, ‘and we’re obviously trying to avoid that. But you’ve seen how little we’re getting from the Treasury this year; I’m not in control of that. If you’ve got a way to make the Government cough up some more cash, then I’d be the first one to buy you a drink.’

Ken waved a hand, almost as if he was physically pushing Julian’s words away. ‘I’m just saying, the last thing we need right now is a load of fuss about bins not being collected and rubbish mounting up. I’d rather not have to explain to my constituents why we’re living through another plague of rats. You can understand, I’m sure. Well,’ he glanced down at his watch before Julian could offer any reply, examining the hands magisterially, ‘I’ll be getting off now. Lots to do; plenty to think about. I suppose I’ll be seeing you around the place?’

‘You will.’ Julian submitted to Ken’s enthusiastic handshake once again, and then the larger man turned, making his way down the corridor, stepping quickly for all of the weight he carried with him. Julian watched him, not saying a word until Ken had

passed out of sight. Then he took his spare hand off my shoulder, as though he'd not trusted himself to stand without support until then.

'Prick,' he said, quietly.

I was surprised by his tone more than I was the word (for someone so polite and personable, Julian had an almost-adolescent affection for bad language in private). It wasn't so much that there was venom in his voice, but rather a real conviction behind the insult, as though no-one could doubt that his assessment of Ken Johnson's character was entirely correct.

'He didn't seem that bad,' I said, as we started towards his office. 'Bit...I don't know, *blokey*, but still...'

'An idiot,' Julian said, briskly. 'Doesn't know how the world works and hasn't taken any opportunity to learn so far. Guy's for the working class above everything else and doesn't understand why Labour should lift a finger to help anyone other than them. Thinks we should leave the EU because of how the globalist elites exploit the working class, which is everything you need to know about him in one very simple sentence.' He looked back to where Ken had vanished from sight for a moment. 'Cocky prick,' he said. 'Did you hear him? Not even pretending to think I might be running: that was deliberate. His way of trying to make me think twice about it.' He sighed, and some of the grimness was smoothed out of his expression. 'Well, thank God he's not the most accomplished social engineer,' he said. 'Otherwise I might just have been fooled.'

'If he's as bad as you say, then it's not like you'll have to worry about people voting for him,' I pointed out, hoping that he would regain his cheerful mood.

'He's an MP,' Julian said, fairly, 'so people *have* voted for him. And they're going to know his name better than they do most of the other candidates'. But I doubt he'll get it. Not exactly a stand-out candidate, our Ken Johnson. Twenty years as an MP without any real responsibility.'

'And the people he'll be up against are going to look better?' I asked.

That coaxed a smile out of him. 'Well, there'll be a former Shadow Chancellor, which is a nice job title to have on a CV. But there'll be a few impressive players out there.'

'Like other MPs?' I asked. After all, Julian had left Westminster for this opportunity; others might be tempted to do the same. 'Will they want to stand in the election as well?'

Julian shrugged. 'It's very likely. As jobs go, it's one a politician could do. But there'll be others: business leaders, city council leaders. It's all up in the air.'

We reached his office, and he held the door open for me, following me inside.

'And when are the elections again?' I asked, holding out the notes I'd taken in the meeting.

'2017,' Julian replied briskly, motioning for me to leave them on a desk. 'So there's time. Right now, nobody knows exactly who's going to be running, apart from a certain few individuals.' He looked at his watch. 'We've got to go in about ten minutes,' he said. 'Then we're going to have a look around some of the less-developed areas of this fine city: lots of places with lots of work to be done. When I start talking about what I want done with the money this deal's going to bring in, I don't want to run out of things to say. After that, there's a meeting of the North East Combined Authority, discussing what we know about devolution so far, putting our heads together, that sort of thing.' He stopped, looking around him for a moment, almost vacantly. 'I'm going to make a couple of calls,' he said. 'Why don't you get a coffee? Make sure the hangover's gone.'

Any more coffee and I'd risk vibrating through the rest of the day. Still, I recognised a dismissal when I heard it, and took myself off to the bathroom.

The rest of our day, as he'd promised, took us around a collection of sites for which Julian and Newcastle City Council held responsibility. It came as a surprise to see the poor condition of estates and neighbourhoods seemingly no distance at all from a modern and vibrant city centre, even after hearing him talk about unemployment. Newcastle's heart might be a confusion of styles and eras, but you couldn't doubt that there had been money spent, and plenty of it. In the lesser organs and arteries, there was still work left to be done and plenty of that. The differences were startling.

At each site, Julian edged his car onto a curb and then the two of us would get out, walking around the area, taking stock of our surroundings. In most of these places, some attempt at gentrification already seemed to be taking shape; it was possible in some areas to see the path of progress as it made its way through the streets. But there were less encouraging signs: streets full of litter, graffiti scrawled across the boarded-up windows of shops and restaurants; it made for a depressing view.

In a place called Elswick, we found ourselves standing a short distance away from five high rise flats, spaced regularly away from each other. Julian stayed where he was for some time, his expression difficult to read as he regarded the buildings. I spent a

few seconds looking myself, but I was unable to see what had caught his attention. They were flats: just blocks of flats. It wasn't like you could write poetry about them. Well, you probably could, but you shouldn't.

After almost two minutes, Julian sighed. 'You know what that is?'

I shrugged. 'Tower blocks?'

'This is Riverside Dene,' he said. 'It used to be called Cruddas Park, but when the powers that be decided to revitalise the place, a new name seemed like a good way to get away from its previous reputation.'

'Did it work?'

'Well, it cost a forty-five-thousand-pound consultancy fee, so I really hope so,' Julian replied, and then smiled at my look of surprise. 'Way back when, there was another city council leader. Have you ever heard of a man called T. Dan Smith?'

The name sounded familiar, but I couldn't place it. I shook my head.

'I'm not too surprised,' he said. 'You don't get to hear much about him outside of Newcastle: not now, anyway. Back then, he was big. Most prominent political figure outside of London, which is more impressive than it sounds.'

'Who was he?'

'He did the same job as me: leader of Newcastle City Council. And he was...well, most people call him "visionary", and he definitely had a vision for Newcastle: he kept saying how it could be like Milan, or the Brasilia of the North.' Julian caught my expression and smiled. 'I'll admit, that was probably a little too ambitious. But for the most part, he had a gift for getting things done. And I'd even say he was what Newcastle needed at the time: he wasn't satisfied to collect wages, attend a few nice functions and keep things ticking over. He was trying to make changes all over the place. He got people invested in their own city and showed them that it could be improved. Without him, the slum housing that was around in the fifties and sixties might have taken a lot longer to get rid of.'

'But?' I asked. It seemed like it was going to be that kind of story. Most of the time, it was.

'*But*,' Julian confirmed, giving me a nod, 'it all went wrong. In several ways. For a start, you might have noticed that some of his architectural ideas were a bit...well, godawful.'

'The city does look sort of...weirdly put together.'

'And the Brutalism?'

‘The Brutalism in particular,’ I agreed, ‘sticks out.’ Feeling like I should probably say something nice about the place, I gestured at the flats. ‘These look alright.’

‘They were redeveloped,’ Julian informed me. ‘For a grand total of ninety million. They were going to do all ten, but it turned out that it made more sense to just pull five of them down. But less than ten years ago, they were on their way to becoming slum housing. Which is exactly what Smith had been trying avoid in the first place by building the things. You’ve got your phone? Look up “Cruddas Park”. Find some photos.’

I did as he said, and in a few seconds could see what he meant. The flats we were looking at now were fine: modern, pleasant-looking, totally acceptable. What had been standing there originally had been the opposite. Brown brick dominated, with gaping square windows and dirty yellow panels. Run-of-the-mill Brutalism was bad enough, but this was definitely the dark side.

‘Ah,’ I said, in lieu of anything more descriptive or condemnatory. I still wasn’t sure what the point to this orientation lecture was and preferred to hedge my bets.

‘Yep,’ said Julian, who hadn’t looked at the photo but seemed satisfied that I had. ‘It was supposed to be part of his vision: “cities in the sky”.’

‘Meaning tower blocks?’

‘It was pretty revolutionary back then. And if that had been all of it, he might be remembered a lot more kindly. But there’s more. See, Smith started making sure that a certain architectural company got all the big jobs in exchange for a fair amount of bribes.’ He glanced at me, and added, ‘*Allegedly*.’ His voice dripped sarcasm over the four syllables. ‘Holidays, gifts: you know the sort of thing. So, buildings done and plenty of kickbacks. He went to jail: quite a few did. It was a big scandal back in the day, but before your time. Almost before mine, if I’m honest.’

He seemed to think for a while longer before turning to look back at the flats, which I was already feeling a lot better disposed towards. ‘Smith was extremely powerful in the region,’ he said, his voice a little distant. ‘People said that he was like a city boss: the kind they get in America. And he ended up in prison, and others too: Cunningham, Poulson, Pottinger. Led to a Home Secretary’s resignation and possibly changed who might have been Prime Minister, according to some.’

I nodded. It sounded like it had been an interesting event to have a front row seat for, and I was starting to get an idea why he seemed to be fixated on it.

‘Whoever becomes the Mayor of the North East is going to have the same sort of power that Smith had, except this time it’ll be official. The last time that happened, it ended in one of the most important corruption trials of this century. The North East’s finally got a chance to bring itself up to a position where we can make real changes. Politics isn’t just going to be about London looking after London any more. Whoever’s Mayor, whether it’s me or one of the other candidates, *cannot* afford to ruin this. If that happens, then that’s it: either we’ll be stuck with whatever problems we’ve created for ourselves, or this self-determination we’ve worked for is just going to get taken away, because it’ll have been proved that we can’t handle it.’ His fists clenched. ‘Devolution *has* to work. Whoever ends up running it needs to *make it* work.’

I nodded. He’d not said it out loud, but you could tell what he’d been thinking as he’d been speaking: as far as he was concerned, there was only one person who’d be able to do the job and do it properly, and that person was Julian Ashworth. He had, after all, come here for that exact reason.

I wondered what would happen if he didn’t get voted in.

Eventually, Julian turned away. ‘Come on,’ he said. ‘I thought it was a good idea for you to see them.’ He gestured at the flats. ‘I wanted you to see how much influence the Mayor’s going to have in this place: all over the North East.’ He managed a wan smile. ‘And it’s good for me to have the occasional reminder of who was here before me, and how that all worked out.’

It was something to consider: both the scope of the eventual Mayor’s powers, and what had happened to the last guy. I fell in step behind Julian, but not before looking back at the five remaining high-rise blocks. I’d never be able to call them ugly – not after seeing what had been there before – but there was something about the idea of tower blocks I’d never quite been comfortable with. Probably there’d been a time when the idea of a multitude of living spaces stacked on top of each other in columns would be seen as futuristic: something out of science fiction. To me, it looked like storage. An unfortunate option for those for whom houses weren’t a possibility: to be stowed away in boxes, more like possessions than people.

A more innovative style of residence was waiting for us at Byker: a place that until then I’d assumed had been invented by the BBC. A huge length of building – more like a giant wall than a space for living – stretched out in front of me. There were windows set along its length: eyes staring out from its colossal face. I stared from left to right, trying to get a handle on the size of this metropolitan leviathan.



Julian caught my expression, which was probably saying more about the structure than I'd be able to in polite company, and managed another smile. This one, at least, was more cheerful. He seemed to have recovered his usual spark, apparently no longer brooding on the mistakes of his distant predecessor.

'Quite a sight, isn't it?'

'It really is,' I replied. I waited to see if he was going to explain anything, and then asked, 'What actually *is* it?'

Julian laughed. 'That, my young Southern friend, is the Byker Wall.'

'And what exactly is the Byker Wall?'

'Around six hundred apartments. It actually won a few awards.' He waved his arm grandly towards it. 'This is another area that used to be all slum housing. The whole idea was to give the families of the area a place to live where you could have the same sense of community rather than breaking them all apart. Old neighbourhoods, you know. Families there for generations.'

I was still looking from one end of the Wall to another. 'I've never understood that,' I admitted. 'My family lived in the same area going way back, and there's never been a big community feel to it.' Admittedly, any home that my mother lived in was probably never going to be part of a community, or at least not a part that the community itself would want. 'When I lived in St Andrews, I don't think I ever even met my neighbours.'

'I imagine things were a little different back then,' Julian commented. 'Less television channels, no mobile phones and no social media. People spent time around other people.'

I nodded, unable to see the appeal. 'So, did they stay together here?' I asked, motioning at the structure. 'The families and neighbourhoods?'

Julian gave a shrug. 'About twenty percent; that's the figure I've been told. But I imagine it's better than living in a slum, wouldn't you?'

'How good a sense of community would the slum have?'

Julian snorted. 'Glad I could get your posh London perspective on the issues besetting the North East. And to think people say that there's a North-South divide.'

We took a moment to look at the Wall together. I had to admit, it was a lot more dynamic than tower blocks, even if you'd not be likely to make friends with anyone living on the opposite end to you. And there was probably something reassuring at seeing housing which had been planned by someone who'd not then gone to prison.

‘And would you want to build something like this?’ I asked. ‘When you’re Mayor of the North East?’

He turned to me. ‘Do you think it’s what the North East needs?’

‘I still don’t really know what this place needs.’

He grinned. ‘Emperor Hadrian built a wall in the North East. Admittedly, that was to keep the Scots out, a lot of whom currently don’t want to be in the UK anyway. Right now, I think there are more important things to work towards than interesting architecture. Affordable housing is already being arranged as we speak; as long as there’s no screw-ups before 2017, it should be funded, arranged, and ready to be rolled out.’

‘What about transport?’ That was one of the other parts of the region devolution was going to hand over to local government. I’d only ridden on a few buses and on the strange beast called ‘the Metro’ once, but they’d both looked like they’d seen better days.

‘A mess,’ he admitted. ‘There are lots of underfunded companies who are providing subpar service with far too many delays. Of course, if they nationalise the trains then that’s less of an issue, but there’ll still be buses, the Metro, ferries. Thank God the motorway work’s going to be finished by then, although that’s been an almighty headache up until now. So yes: that’s going to be an area deserving of some attention.’

‘And what else?’

Julian smiled. ‘The money that’s going to come from devolution isn’t just a chance to improve infrastructure or housing in the area; it’s also a chance to let the North East start something that it can keep building on: it means job creation, letting us compete with international markets, giving everyone the opportunity to pursue a far wider range of careers. It could thoroughly transform this place: let us go it on our own and even prove that we can do just as well as London.’

I didn’t make any comment about this, not that I’d had one prepared. Julian seemed like he had plenty to think about; his looking ahead to the future had appeared to revive him from the sober mood this T. Dan Smith had put him in. I’d not known him long, but it was still clear that Julian was motivated by the promise of something being accomplished. Maybe national government wouldn’t have been the place for him; it seemed like an area where ideas took a long time to turn into action. In local government, even with devolution and thirty million more in funds to play with,

there'd be less attention. Possibly less red tape. In this role, at least, Julian might be able to be as dynamic as he wanted.

We took one more trip, this time to look at Benwell. I'd seen worse places, although I couldn't have told you where on the spot. It was a far cry from the city centre, which Julian acknowledged.

'Some areas weren't considered as important as others,' he said, looking around. 'Plenty of tall buildings and shopping centres and bloody awful roundabouts where everyone can see them, but then you've got places like this. It's the kind of thing that the Combined Authority's going to have to remember. Out of the way places like this: they matter. They're not likely to get much investment from private companies right now, not without us putting in the groundwork first. The city centre, places like Jesmond and Gosforth: they're already getting investment, and they'll hopefully keep getting more. But if devolution is going to benefit the North East, then it's got to build up places like this until they can start building themselves up. More jobs. More money. Better lives.'

'More people in the centre,' I pointed out.

'And a lot of them come home to places like this every night. I don't want them going to work at Fenwick or Eldon Square, seeing a load of money being poured in to building new bars or restaurants and then coming home to streets like this, wondering if things are going to get better. If there's a group of people saying that we ignored them, or that they were looked over or betrayed, then it's because we won't have done enough, or at least not done enough right.'

That seemed to put an end the outing. Julian drove me back to the Civic Centre and then left on some personal errand. I swung by the legal section of the building, half-hoping to run into Sonia, but she'd already left. I then met Julian, ready to accompany him to the North East Combined Authority meeting.

It was once again my role to take notes on what was discussed, allowing Julian to exist in the moment. As I did so, I tried to comprehend the actual details that were covered as best I could, but you probably needed some more context and a lot more passion for the North East than I had, even after a tour of its architectural past. After ten minutes of attempting to understand everything that was said, I instead focused on Julian. He was his fully-energised self, his speech about the future of the region apparently inspiring him. Whenever there was a disagreement, he was there to mediate. If someone needed convincing, Julian's enthusiasm was often key to bring

them on board. Whenever he refuted a point, it was done with the utmost politeness and care.

It might not have mattered what the subject was; it certainly seemed as though Julian could represent most courses of action extremely effectively. But he gave the impression of being ready to fight to the end for devolution, and the emotion didn't seem in any way counterfeit. And while the other members of the committee didn't quite match his zeal, there was certainly an air of possibility and potential throughout the discussion; you didn't need to know the details to notice that.

With Julian's lecture on the power and responsibility of the Mayor of the North East at the forefront of my mind, I found myself looking at the other city council leaders at the table. It might have been my imagination, but when they looked at Julian it seemed as though there was a kind of wariness in their eyes. I could understand, or at least I thought I could. Julian had been sent here by the Labour Party, which was a good indicator of what they expected to happen. Some of the men at the table wouldn't be too happy with the prospect of there being a Mayor, but I expected that some others could probably live with it if it was their name on door. In that case, Julian was the man to beat.

Once the meeting had come to a conclusion, I said goodbye to Julian and took a walk through the city, looking at the buildings with a new eye. As I wandered aimlessly, knowing only that I was approaching the river and therefore Gateshead, I spotted a sign on one of the many Victorian buildings that Smith hadn't managed to hammer down with the brass-knuckled fist of Brutalism. There was a sign hung between the two pillars on either side of the doorway, with a sign telling me: *We've been here since 1825, have you been in yet?*

It was a fair question.

Another sign informed me that I was standing outside the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle upon Tyne. I had no idea what that signified, despite knowing what all the words meant individually, but the sign certainly seemed to suggest that my entry wouldn't cause any affront, and in the absence of any other literary and philosophical invitations I decided to step inside.

A large staircase led me up a flight, passing various paintings of gentlemen in various states of severity, and the statue of another man: pure white and wearing a toga. I took in the sight and kept moving. There was always the chance that this was

another bar: anything describing itself as literary or philosophical, in my experience, eventually and inevitably turned towards alcohol.

This optimism proved groundless as I reached the first floor, stepping through a wooden door to find myself in one of the grandest libraries I'd ever seen. Huge shelves containing thousands upon thousands of books lined every wall and created corridors over the floor. Bleached busts of elderly men were placed at regular intervals, and a balcony running high above, allowing access to even more books.

I allowed myself the luxury of ten seconds with wide eyes and an open mouth. During my time as an undergraduate, my love of research had emerged and had been extremely useful, and that had developed into a huge appreciation for libraries: the more dignified and antique the better.

I started to move to the librarian's counter before I spotted the computer across the room: it looked like it had been there since the 1960s, though it was still the most modern thing present that wasn't breathing.

I stood in front of the computer and typed a name into the search bar.

T. Dan Smith.

The search came back with two books. They were biographies: one by a man I'd never heard of, and the other by the man himself. Both volumes were in the library. I set off further into the library, coming back after a few seconds to check where the books were.

I moved along the shelves, searching for what I was trying hard not to think of as homework. As I perused, it quickly became apparent that no matter how grand the library had first appeared, it was another part of Newcastle that desperately in need of money. There was...well, a *tattiness* to the place: a sense of glory that had faded over the years. You could imagine Miss Havisham holding court here in her wedding dress, her rotting cake crumbling onto copies of *Private Eye* and *The Economist*.

Once I'd finally located the books, pulling them free from their dusty homes on the shelf, I took them over to the front desk. As it turned out, to take any of the books out I'd need to purchase membership, and to purchase a membership I'd need to hand over sixty pounds every year. That hurt a little, but the place broadcast such a need for money that George Gissing would have written a novel about it, whilst sixty pounds was to me the equivalent of a couple of nights out. I made my donation, satisfied that I would not be visited that night by three spirits bent on teaching me the true meaning of funding arts and culture, and tucked the books into my bag. I was looking forward

to finding out more about Mr Smith. Anyone who could make a mark like he had on a city was someone who could probably teach you a couple of lessons.

Once on the bus back to my flat, I took out the first of the books, beginning to flip through it. I'd get around to reading it properly later; for now, I was simply looking for key phrases: buzzwords. He'd been a politician, so I assumed that any biography would have plenty of them.

My planned skim didn't go quite as anticipated. After a few ruffles through the volume, a particular passage caught my attention: *His greatest mistake has been accepting the job of Chairman of the Economic Planning Committee, which has as yet neither money nor power, thereby losing his grip on the original seat of his power, the Newcastle Council. Smith has also a very long way to go before he will be accepted as regional boss, and he has made a number of enemies among the town bosses, some of whom regard him as a flamboyant upstart from the big city...*

I smiled, wondering whether Julian had read this same book. Probably, considering how much he seemed to be dwelling on its subject: a ghost still haunting the city forty years on through its architecture. And if he'd read the passage I was reading, I wondered how much of himself he'd seen in that description. Did he have enemies? Did he think that he did? Did he see himself as a 'flamboyant upstart'? How much did that description even encompass in Newcastle upon Tyne? I could probably be considered a flamboyant upstart, and I wasn't starting up anything.

I flipped through to the index, searching for some of the words I'd become well-acquainted with over the past few days. Finding one, I flicked back through the book, searching for the corresponding page.

*TDS as the "Voice of the North" urged passionately that power should be devolved from central government to directly-elected provincial (regional) authorities in England, to mirror what was then being proposed for Scotland and Wales.*

Well, didn't that sound familiar?

It was probably coincidence, and if that was case then there was no reason to worry. But if Julian was seeing parallels between himself and Smith, that probably meant something. T. Dan Smith had spent a few years in jail, which was worth remembering. If history somehow repeated itself in Newcastle, then T. Dan Smith Version Two-Point-Oh wouldn't go down alone. According to Julian, the original certainly hadn't. And I had a certain, inescapable feeling that that was the *most* important thing to remember.

I liked Julian, even if I still wasn't sure of what it was he'd seen in me which had made him offer to bring me here, or of what exactly it had been in him which had made me accept. But I wasn't willing to go to prison for him.

I shut the book, done with history for now. If nothing else, Councillor Smith had at least given us all a warning, and a blueprint for exactly what not to do. Up until a certain point in the future, we had a map.

After that, I'd just have to hope that politics could be as dull and devoid of excitement as Uncle Andrew seemed to advertise.

## CHAPTER SIX

‘Dull’ lasted for a while. Had I known how short a time that we would have together, I’d have probably appreciated its presence more. As it was, I had merely quietly enjoyed trying to match Julian’s energetic stride, taking in any one of his infinite lessons about politics and steadily adding more and more bottles to the small bar I kept under the stairs.

Much of my day involved tailing him as he bounced from meeting to committee to yet another meeting, stopping for just long enough to grab us both a coffee en route. Julian had an endless capacity for caffeine, which explained both his uncanny amounts of energy and how much of my day was spent making a fresh pot. Aside from that, my role was to watch my mentor in action, try to retain whatever useful lesson or information there was to be learned and file the documents and printouts which Julian seemed determined to blanket his desk with. As had been the case the first time, the meetings regarding devolution were the highlight of his routine: the one time he could be nakedly and shamelessly optimistic, surrounded by the other leaders of city councils who appeared to feel the same way. I was getting a little better at following the ins and outs of what was discussed at the meetings, and as far as I could tell progress was being made.

The rest of his working day wasn’t nearly so cheerful. Cuts to council services were, no matter what Julian thought of them, inevitable. Suggestions and plans were sent to him on how these might be implemented, each met with irritation from the man whose job it was to choose one. Someone had come up with the optimistic slogan ‘Ambition in the Face of Austerity’, which had fooled no-one and had done little to improve the general mood. Ken Johnson’s Cassandraic prophecy about trouble with the bin collectors grew more and more truthful every day, and soon Julian was having tense phone calls with those closer to the situation than he was, whatever news he received doing little to improve his mood.

Escape from the endless cuts and grinding machinery that was Newcastle City Council mostly came in the form of Sonia. Our first night out had apparently confirmed for both of us that we had seen something worthwhile in each other, and we had started spending more and more time together as if in hope of figuring out what that was. Most of our activities involved drinking, it had to be said, but there were often weekends when we would take ourselves off to the cinema, or she’d give



me a tour of some sight I'd not managed to find myself yet. It was a very companionable friendship, and though there were times when it felt like one or both of us was on the verge of seeing what else it could become, for the meantime friendship was all it was and something which made us both very happy.

At the beginning of March, after hanging up with some satisfaction on the Council Member for Neighbourhoods and Regulatory Services, Julian informed me that he planned to throw a party at his house and that I was invited.

'Don't feel the need to dress up too nice or anything,' he said, waving an airy hand and trying to place his feet on his desk in a casual manner. This was hampered by the fact that his desk was at that moment piled high with papers and files: a testament to Julian's resistance to my attempts at office management. Admitting defeat after several seconds, he spun the chair to the left and placed his feet back down on the floor. 'I just thought it would be nice to get some people together, knock back some drinks and relax a little. We've been working extremely hard, after all.'

He wasn't wrong. Julian's energy, fed from the promise and progress of the devolution agreement, had seemed to suffuse the Civic Centre for past two months, but the strain of hard work and the need to save money was beginning to show.

'Sounds good,' I said, draining my coffee mug. It was nearly five, and we were both winding down to leave. It had become a tradition to end our last few minutes in the office with a companionable conversation about anything other than work. 'It'll be nice to have a chance to mingle.'

'Bring your lady friend,' Julian suggested. He and Sonia still hadn't met, though some days it seemed like he was using council funds to have us tracked on our frequent nights out, presumably waiting with baited breath for news of that first drunken shag. Still, he seemed to approve of her, or at least thought that it was 'so damn useful to have a lawyer to hand all the time'. I steadily ignored all of his insinuations, though this did very little to discourage him.

'I'll ask her,' I said. 'When is it?'

'Next Saturday,' Julian replied. 'The nineteenth. My place. I'll send out some email or book people's faces or whatever the young people are saying now.' I laughed, and he shook his head disapprovingly. 'Not sure what you find funny,' he remarked. 'Having you around is supposed to help me connect with the young voters and let me take over this place: if I don't know my Spacebook from MyFace, then it could lead to disaster.'

I let him playfully harangue me for several more minutes before making my exit. Sonia and I were grabbing a post-working day coffee, and I caught her outside her room. Her middle-aged female co-workers were filing out past her, so we were subjected to the standard giggles as they saw me approach. Clearly one of Julian's ambitions in the face of austerity was to make sure that everyone believed that Sonia and I were on the verge of elopement. Sonia shot me a grin and we set off down the stairs, in search of espresso and an escape from politics and the law.

'A party?' she mused, sipping from her small cup. 'Could be fun. Who else is invited, apart from us young'uns?'

I shrugged. 'Didn't really ask for any details.'

'Typical man. How am I supposed to know what to wear? What to bring? What area of expertise regarding Newcastle City Council business I have to brush up on?'

'Do you really need to know all that?' She flicked some of her espresso at me, aiming to miss, and I laughed. 'I promise I'll find out some more,' I said. 'And then you can show up in exactly the right outfit. Does that work for you?'

'It'll do. Any idea what Julian's parties are like?'

'Not a clue: never been to one. I know he used to hang out with my uncle, and he can drink better than you'd expect when you first meet him.'

'I suppose he does have a reputation as parliamentary bad boy to protect,' Sonia pointed out. 'And with a lot less media scrutiny on him...' she grinned at me, 'we could be walking into quite the social event.'

'You're expecting house keys in a bowl?'

'I was thinking more a full-blown orgy, but I might just be more adventurous than you are.' She glanced at her watch and made a face. 'I should get back. Skype call with the parents in a bit, and if I'm not there they'll assume I'm in some kind of den of iniquity and sin.'

I looked around us. Caffè Nero didn't seem to offer those kinds of opportunities, but I didn't bother pointing that out.

I managed, by degrees, to drag more details from Julian and convey them to an increasingly-impatient Sonia. It seemed that even Julian wasn't quite certain what form the party was going to take, and if I was a more cynical person (or if I was Sonia, who was quite cynical enough for the pair of us with enough pessimism left over to quell a communist uprising) then I would have thought that it was only my pestering him for information which led to him making any decisions about the event at all. At

any event, the nineteenth soon arrived, and Sonia and I both met at the Jesmond Metro station, walking the short distance to my mentor's house.

We paused outside, looking up at the place. It was definitely large enough: three storeys rising up in front of us. I hadn't seen Sonia's living situation yet, but it did make my ground-level flat in Gateshead look extremely meagre. Warm light shone from the windows, casting the shadows of guests against the glass, and it was just possible to hear the music and conversation from within.

Sonia and I looked at each other in surprise. 'And he definitely said half past eight?' Sonia asked, doubtfully. 'Because either my watch is wrong, *you're* wrong, or this has been going on for a while.'

'He said to be here at eight thirty,' I said. 'I put it in my phone the second he did. And it's eight thirty now.' I frowned. 'Why would he tell us to show up at the wrong time?'

Sonia just shrugged, but the look she directed at the house was still calculating. After a second, she shook her head as if to dislodge whatever she was thinking. 'Nice place,' she said, her voice more casual.

'Seems to have done alright, doesn't he?' I said. 'Come on.' We walked towards the door, which was slightly ajar, and then stepped inside.

The heat hit us once we were in, as did the babble of conversations. There seemed to be people everywhere, milling about through the hallway and the other rooms which opened on from it. We glanced at each other, shrugged simultaneously, and moved further into the house. They had definitely been here for some time.

We found Julian in the kitchen, talking with a group of distinguished-looking men and women as he smoothly pulled the cork out of a bottle of red wine. He looked up as we stepped into the room and grinned, placing the screwed cork down on the kitchen island. 'Ah, Tom. Miraculously good timing you have there: this is probably the best bottle we've opened so far. Drink?'

I nodded, focusing on Julian and trying to ignore the attentive stares of the others, all of whom were trying to work out what such young people were doing in what probably did count as a den of iniquity and sin. I also noted his use of the phrase 'so far': something had been going on here before our arrival.

Julian filled a glass and pushed it towards me, prompting me to step forward and take it, Sonia following. 'This young man is one Tom Barrett, future Prime Minister,' he said, flashing me a wink. 'I worked with his uncle: Andrew Darnay.' There were

sounds of acknowledgement and understanding around me. I couldn't believe that these people almost three hundred miles away were apparently familiar with Uncle Andrew. I was a blood relative and I'd barely even heard of him.

The leader of Newcastle City Council turned to Sonia, still smiling. 'And this, I believe, is Sonia Malik: a young lady doing extremely good work in our housing and planning department.' He tilted the bottle over another glass. 'Red?'

Sonia nodded, returning his smile. 'Thank you very much.' She took the glass of wine that Julian offered her, sniffing it before taking a sip.

'There should be some food in the dining room,' Julian went on, 'and a few people around you might recognise. So, relax, mingle, have a nice time.' He filled a glass for himself, and then turned to answer a question he hadn't fully heard.

Sonia nudged me and tilted her head towards a second door. I nodded and followed her out of the kitchen.

'So, that's Julian Ashworth,' she said. 'Nice guy. Great hair.'

'Something people look for in a politician?' I asked, trying the wine. It was dark and dry: possibly another Sangiovese. Julian might become the best Mayor in the history of the region, but he really did have appalling taste in wine.

'I wouldn't call it a negative, but it wouldn't stop me looking at his policies,' Sonia replied, absently. 'Come on: let's find some food. I've been starving myself to get into this dress.'

I looked her up and down. Her dress was black and clung to her body flatteringly. She noticed me looking and smiled. 'You look very nice too. Definitely my favourite of your four suits.'

'Five,' I said, having another drink.

'I'm trying to bury the memory of that light grey one,' she said. 'And you know what'll happen if you wear it again.'

I nodded, smiling. Sonia had been specific, graphic and quite terrifying in her attention to detail. The suit had not been worn again.

After we'd passed through several rooms, all of which were populated by Julian's guests, we managed to track down some food and began to circulate. Despite Julian's assurances, most of our fellow partygoers didn't seem quite sure of who we were, but I had been raised by a family of people who had never quite grasped the point of differentiating between relatives, whilst Sonia was social enough to be on first-name

terms with three Big Issue salespersons and wasted no time winning herself several new friends.

There were several guests who did know us by sight and were accustomed to seeing me at Julian's side. As I'd half-expected, there were several questions about what had brought the new leader of the city council to the frozen North which probably would have been interrogative before the third glass of wine. As it was, it was easy enough to deflect, distract or just completely ignore the question: something else I'd learned from family functions. I was extremely aware of Sonia beside me as I dodged these inquiries, but all she did help me turn the conversation to more friendly territory.

Most of the time, I let Sonia lead our half of the dialogue; she was more confident in that area than I was. Even so, the alcohol had turned the guests into a friendly enough audience. More than anything, everyone just seemed to want to have a good time.

We'd been there for about an hour, mingling and circulating, before I saw someone whose name I knew. Julian had been moving in and out of sight, topping up glasses and making the occasional convivial comment, and we'd not bothered him, thinking that it would be for the best if he could run the party without interruptions.

It was Sonia who spotted the familiar face first, as she turned around to scope the room. 'Bloody hell,' she said, sounding honestly surprised. 'My MP just walked in the room.'

I turned around too, and saw Ken Johnson making his way through the lounge. 'Ken Johnson's your MP?' I asked. 'And you know who your MP is?'

Sonia looked at me. 'You *don't* know who your MP is?'

'Haven't had to yet; we're a while away from an election.'

She kept looking at me for a second longer before turning back to Ken Johnson with a mutter of what sounded like 'Jesus Christ'.

By this time, Ken was halfway across the room, and closing in. 'Well, better have done your research,' I said, smiling politely at the approaching MP. 'Looks like it's Sonia Malik's Question Time.'

Sonia was already meeting Ken Johnson's eyes as he drew closer. 'Mr Johnson,' she said, brightly. 'Didn't expect to see you here.'

Ken blinked, caught off-guard by the greeting, and then smiled. 'Ah, yes,' he said, something clicking in his memory. 'Miss...um...Malik?'

She nodded. 'Sonia Malik. And I think you've met Tom Barrett before?'

Ken looked at me, and again you could see him pulling something out of whatever filing system his mind used. 'Of course: Julian's protégé.'

A very cynical and most definitely Southern part of my mind was surprised that Ken Johnson knew a word like 'protégé', but I just kept smiling. 'Good to see you again, Mr Johnson.'

'Oh, don't bother with any of that: just make it "Ken". We're at a party, aren't we?' Behind Ken, I saw Julian walk into the room, glance over to us and walk right back out again. Ken hadn't noticed; he was talking to Sonia. 'You've come to several of my surgeries, haven't you? Must be where I've seen you before.'

She nodded. 'My neighbour's not always in the best shape, so I go along for her when I can. She's very involved.'

'Very civic-minded of you. So not thinking of running for a seat yourself, then?'

Sonia laughed, shaking her head. 'That's Tom and Julian's department; I'm going to be a lawyer.'

Ken laughed as well: a great booming laugh. 'Probably the smartest one of us, or at least the wealthiest. Where did you come here from, Sonia?'

'Heaton,' Sonia replied. 'Not a bad journey; Tom's all the way out in Gateshead.'

The MP shook his head genially. 'No, I meant originally: where were you before Newcastle?'

If you were watching Sonia, which I had fallen into the habit of doing since meeting her, then it was just possible to catch the flicker of irritation on her face. I was almost certain that Ken Johnson hadn't noticed it; his smile was just as broad and friendly as ever, and in a second Sonia's face was cheerful and serene again.

'Before this I was in Enniskillen.'

'And where's that?'

'Ireland,' Sonia said. 'Northern Ireland: keeps life exciting.'

Ken nodded, looking a little more uncertain. 'Yes, but...before that?'

I took a drink, wanting a slightly bigger alcohol cushion if this was going to end with Sonia stabbing someone in the neck with her wineglass. But she seemed to be in perfect control of herself.

'Before that, it was New Delhi,' she said, taking a sip of her own drink. 'But I'm a lot more Irish than Indian; I don't remember much about it.'

Before Ken could answer, Julian stepped towards our group. 'Ken,' he said, offering the man a glass of wine. He had a second, fuller one which he kept for himself.

I wondered if Ken had been invited late as well, or if he'd had his own business to attend to.

Ken took the glass and Julian's hand, subjecting him to his vigorous shake. 'Ah, the Dear Leader. How's life with the local authority?'

'Ticking along nicely, Ken, thanks very much,' Julian said. 'How's representing Newcastle East going?'

'We seem to be managing alright,' Ken said carelessly. 'As alright as not being in government goes. Still, suppose I should be grateful I've got a seat in the meantime.'

If it was meant as a delicate thrust, and I doubted that Ken Johnson was accused of delicacy very often, then Julian didn't seem to register it. His face stayed perfectly calm, not betraying any flicker of annoyance like Sonia's had. 'I suppose so.'

'I was wondering, actually, Julian,' Ken went on, his tone companionable. 'You and Jeremy are still pretty close, aren't you?'

'As far as I'm aware.'

'Talked to him lately?'

'Not recently.' Julian glanced, apparently casually, at my empty wineglass. 'Oh dear, Tom; you appear to be suffering from evaporation. I'll fetch you a –'

'Oh, it's fine,' I said quickly. 'I'll get it. Sonia, need a refill?'

Whether by happenstance or quick thinking, Sonia's wine was also finished, and she followed me as we abandoned the leader of the city council and the MP for Newcastle East.

'You're not the most loyal student, are you Tom?' Sonia commented cheerfully as we moved into the kitchen. 'I thought you'd be expected to take a bullet for your mentor, not throw him to the wolves.'

'If he's going to invite Ken Johnson to his parties then he needs to deal with the consequences of that decision,' I said. 'I don't come to parties to be a human shield.'

Sonia nodded. 'I'll bear that in mind.'

We refilled our glasses with a Malbec rich enough to derail Sonia's criticisms of my lack of fidelity and agreed to avoid that room for the time being.

'And if we hear the sound of two male politicians having a scrap...' Sonia started.

'Then we find a room a little further away,' I said, trying another sip of the Malbec.

We continued to circulate, keeping an eye out for Ken or Julian and an ear out for any unparliamentary conduct. The guests only got friendlier as time went on the wine was depleted, and we spent a convivial half hour getting tutored on the sights and

monuments that we really must see in the North East by a sweet old lady who worked in the licensing department.

Finally, we broke away, the alcohol making us both hazy and hungry. We made our way to the buffet, gathered up some food and found a handy wall to lean against, watching the party go on.

‘You know,’ Sonia said, holding a sausage roll halfway to her mouth, ‘At a guess, I’d say that you’re the only person here who’s not a politician or a city council employee. And I’d say that I’m only here because I’m your plus one.’

I glanced around the room. From what I could tell, it was a typical party: nothing seemed out of the ordinary; no-one was making any grand speeches or trying to present themselves as a statesman. ‘Alright,’ I said, ‘explain that to someone who’s not as clever as you.’

She rolled her eyes. ‘Well, part of it is because I’ve seen the MPs for all three parts of Newcastle here. And I’m not sure, but I think someone mentioned Durham’s MP too, so I’d call it quite the little group. The city council people I recognise because, you know, I work at the city council.’ She looked down at the sausage roll and ate it in one decisive bite. ‘This is a nice party, but I don’t think that’s all it is. Might explain why we were invited so late, if there was a part of this evening at which we weren’t needed. Or wanted. Say...discussions regarding exactly who is going to be North East Mayor, with all the right people invited?’ She gave me a smile. ‘Mr Barrett, have I been dragged into some great political game?’

‘Would that be more or less interesting than an orgy?’ I was still thinking about what she’d said. If she was right, and Sonia tended to make sure that she was before saying anything, then this changed the complexion of the evening entirely and Julian had kept me in the dark about it.

Not that he had any reason to tell me everything. As far as he was concerned, he might have been giving me a night out with free drinks.

I finished the free drink I was holding, frowning slightly. Sonia noticed. ‘You alright? I wasn’t trying to make this seem sinister or anything. Just noticed it gradually.’

‘It’s fine,’ I said, wondering if it was. Partly I was irritated that I’d not been told, if of course there was a deeper meaning to the gathering. Part of me was annoyed at myself for *expecting* to be told. Julian’s lack of discretion around me must have gone to my head more than I’d thought. ‘Fine,’ I said again.



She nodded. 'Who knows?' she said. 'Maybe all of his friends are politicians and city council people.' Sonia seemed to contemplate the apparent horrors of such a life and then shrugged. 'At least he has a nice house.'

It *was* a nice house, and our search for the buffet had let us see about a third of it. Julian didn't have a lot of furniture, but what he did have was perfect for each room; you couldn't imagine anything fitting better. He'd obviously put care and attention into the place. That and a hell of a lot of money.

Sonia was looking around the room too, though with a more searching gaze. 'No idea where the bathroom is, do you?'

I didn't; the bathroom was one of the places we hadn't stumbled on in our search for sausage rolls. 'We could always go exploring.'

'We could,' Sonia agreed. We stepped out of the doorway, leaving the politicians to their plotting and the city council employees to whatever they did on their nights off.

It only took a few minutes to track down the bathroom, and I decided that I'd go back to the kitchen and claim some wine before the members of the conspiracy downstairs finished it. As I turned, I saw a door that was half-open, and through the door I could see Julian.

He was bent over, leaning heavily on his desk with his head bowed. I watched him for a moment, on the verge of turning away whilst not quite able to. I was about to force myself to go downstairs when his head raised, and he saw me.

Julian's face didn't register shock or surprise at seeing me there. Instead he gave a sigh, and then beckoned for me to enter the room. Not feeling quite certain about where this was going, I did, pushing the door open and stepping through before shutting it behind me.

The room, it turned out, was a study. Shelves lined with books, none of them which appeared to be in any kind of order, covered several walls. A desk, the wood scarred and its green leather surface worn, dominated the room. I noticed with approval the selection of whiskies and glasses sitting on a side table. It certainly fit the idea of Julian I'd come to cultivate.

Julian saw me looking at the bottles and nodded. 'Make us two large ones, will you, Tom? The selection's up to you.'

I knew better than to turn my nose up at that opportunity, even though the reason for it still eluded me. I scanned the labels before spotting one which had stuck in my

memory. Smiling a little, I opened the Ardbeg – Julian didn't seem to have tried it yet – and poured a pair of doubles. There was no ice; Julian never weakened his drinks.

Julian took one glass from me and, without hesitating, drank over half of it. I took a sip of mine, the spirit going down easier than when I'd first tried it.

'Thanks,' Julian said, putting his glass down. 'I needed that.'

I nodded but didn't say anything. Years of living with my mother had given me a decent enough instinct of when to speak and when to shut up. In my experience, if people wanted to talk then you didn't often need to encourage them. The hardest part tended to be stopping them.

Sure enough, after a few seconds Julian looked up at me. 'Gateshead's going to pull out of devolution.' He raised a finger to point at the door. 'And in a short enough time, some of the people out there will know about it too. I managed to get the news from someone who'll have come to me first, but we don't have long. They'll be announcing it on Tuesday in any event.'

'Why did they drop it?' I asked. That part didn't make sense to me. Julian wasn't the only one who came out of the devolution planning meeting looking positive; it was probably a novelty for the committee members to be able to discuss strategies which didn't revolve around slashing funding. 'Did they want a better deal?'

'That's part of it,' Julian said, his voice dark. 'There'll be a few changes of offices over at Gateshead Council in the near future, I think: a new council leader at the very least. And the people who'll take over are saying that there's not nearly enough cash there. But that might just be an acceptable excuse; I've not exactly got a dossier right now.'

'And there can't be any more, right?'

'Money?' Julian snorted. 'We're still clawing our way out of a recession and the Government's privatising everything, so I'd have to say no. Apparently, the new man across the Tyne is saying he'll back "genuine devolution" and nothing but. Stupid bastard. Everyone knew this deal wasn't going to be perfect, but it was something to work with: something we could improve on. But no: they've decided to throw all their toys out of the pram and now every business owner in the North East is going to be at their throats, and I don't fancy trying to referee it. Which, if I'm going to look –' he laughed bitterly, '– *mayoral*, then I probably should.'

Again, I didn't scramble for something to say. We both needed to think clearly. We both probably needed to stop drinking, but I knew better than to suggest that.

‘And you can’t do it without Gateshead?’

He snorted. ‘It’s right in the middle; we’d be looking at a devolution donut. Can’t imagine anything more stupid-looking, even ignoring factors like transport: buses, the Metro...can’t see it.’

We were silent again. I didn’t know what I was going to be able to contribute on this topic, but he hadn’t asked me to leave the room, so I was going to try to think of something.

Finally, I said, ‘So you think it’s the new man? The one who’ll be the new Leader of Gateshead Council: just him?’

Julian shrugged. ‘Possibly,’ he said. ‘I shouldn’t think so. It seems like a few councillors are going to vote against it. Whether or not he persuaded them is another matter.’

‘And there’s nothing you could do to persuade them the other way?’ I asked. ‘Nothing else they want?’ I took a drink. ‘Or anything they really don’t want? You could talk to Uncle Andrew, or maybe get in touch with some other people in the Party and...come to some arrangement?’ It wasn’t politics as I assumed Julian and Uncle Andrew played it, but even with Julian’s lessons I still didn’t know what the right thing to do was in this situation.

I was struck, right then, by the absurdity of it all. I had attended a party which might well have been some kind of shady political powwow, and in the middle of that was now sequestered with a politician who was receiving clandestine intelligence and trying to act on it before the politicians that he’d invited to the party/powwow knew anything about it.

I took another, larger drink.

Julian was watching me, and I wondered if I might have stepped over a line. I’d been as oblique as I could be, mainly because speaking specifically about political machinery was beyond me in my current state of pleasant inebriation and not that much easier when I was sober, but I was also aware that what I was suggesting wasn’t what you might call moral. Julian, despite his reputation as the Commons’ swaggering hard man, had a low opinion of bribery, blackmail or backroom deals, and I couldn’t be sure whether he was inferring any of that from what I’d said. I didn’t quite know what I was implying either, though I was probably more flexible when it came to bribery or blackmail than Julian was.

What I really wanted, I realised, was for Julian to have a solution: any solution that worked. I wanted everything to go back to whatever the plan was before this evening, however that might come about, and for him to be once again filled with his indomitable vitality.

I shrugged, the silence and my own thoughts starting to get to me. 'Is there anyone you could call?' I suggested. 'Someone who could make him change his mind? There's got to be someone, right?' To my embarrassment, I realised that I was thinking of Corbyn. That had my mother's style of upbringing written all over it: when you want to solve a problem, go straight to the top.

To my surprise, Julian nodded. 'There could be,' he said. 'I'd have to make some calls, find a few things out.'

'What, now?'

He nodded emphatically. 'Have to be: no time to waste.' He stopped, as though something had just occurred to him. 'Wait here,' he said, reaching into his pocket as he made towards the door. 'If anyone asks anything...' He tailed off on his way out of the room, leaving my options refreshingly open. I'd probably just lie.

I looked around me, taking in the room now that Julian wasn't dominating it. Leaning against or sitting on his desk didn't feel appropriate, so I made my way around the study, stopping for a moment to glance through the whisky collection again.

As I straightened up, I noticed a trio of pictures on the wall which faced the desk. I moved towards the centre of the room looking at them. One of them was of the Tyne Bridge. Next to it, apparently captured from street level, was a print of Grey's Monument.

The third picture was monochrome, like the others, but rather than structures it showed a man. He was a little way out of middle age, wearing a slightly ill-fitting suit and standing in front of the Newcastle Civic Centre. A little over his left shoulder, I could just make out my favourite naked statue, under which I'd met Sonia.

I'd not seen that picture before, but I'd seen others of the man and knew who he was.

T. Dan Smith.

No wonder he preyed on Julian's mind.

'Tom?' I turned, and saw Sonia leaning against the doorway. 'What are you doing in here?'

'I was having a talk with Julian.'

She gestured over her shoulder. 'Well, whatever you told him, he practically knocked me down the stairs to get into the bathroom.' Her eyes moved to the half-empty glass in my hand and the empty one on the desk. 'How much did he drink?'

'Wasn't quite like that,' I said. 'Political manoeuvring.'

'In a bathroom? How industrious.' She strode into the room, holding out her hand. I handed her the whisky; she sniffed it, then sipped it. 'Ardbeg,' she declared. 'Man has a good taste in booze.'

'I picked it,' I said. 'He'd not opened the bottle.'

'Ah,' she said, handing me the glass back. 'Then I've taught you well.' She noticed the pictures and looked them over. 'Oh look: T. Dan Smith,' she declared. 'Could have done anything else to this city but went with Brutalism. Interesting man to use as a decoration.'

'Might be a warning for himself.'

'Or it might be symbolic,' Sonia countered. 'And this should be a huge clue to us that we'll overlook and be shocked later by how obvious it all was.'

'Mm,' I said. 'How much have you had to drink?'

'Not as much as you. You finishing that whisky?'

I drank the rest of it, barely wincing. 'I'm not the one trying to turn everything into some seedy political thriller.'

Sonia smiled, walking towards one of the shelves and reaching for a book at random. 'Ah, but if this was a thriller then I could just pull this book and...' She tugged the book free. Nothing happened; she looked at me. 'Well, the shelf would probably have opened up to reveal a secret room or something.'

'A secret room containing what in particular?'

'Piles of gold? Dead body? The real Julian Ashworth, held prisoner and chained to the wall?'

I thought about this for a moment. 'I think you've got your political and gothic thrillers mixed up.'

She held up the book she'd picked up: *Coningsby* by Disraeli. 'You don't think this guy would rather be writing about ruined castles, dastardly plots and young ladies in thin nightgowns?'

'Might have slightly undermined the outline for New Conservatism he laid out in that novel.'

Sonia looked at me in faint surprise. 'Did Julian tell you all that?'

‘I was an English student,’ I said, taking the book and putting it back on the shelf. ‘I’ve read the book.’

Sonia nodded. ‘Not just a pretty face, then.’ She turned toward the desk, then pointed a finger at something on its surface. ‘Ah,’ she said. ‘The mystery deepens.’

I turned, following her finger. On the desk, amidst what might have been stacks of paper if any attempt had been made to stack them, was a picture in a frame. It was a photograph of two people. One was Julian; he looked about ten years younger, though there might easily have been five years on either side of it. However old he was, he appeared to have the same graceful energy he possessed now, something the dinner jacket he was wearing certainly helped.

Beside him, smiling serenely at the camera, was a woman. She was stunning, dark hair framing an elegant face and deep blue eyes. One arm was linked with Julian’s, the black of her dress and his tuxedo melding together.

‘They look happy,’ I said.

Sonia rolled her eyes. ‘Astounding, Monsieur Poirot; the case is surely solved. Who do you think she *is*, genius?’

I shrugged. ‘Friend? Partner? Sister?’

She snorted. ‘Sister? Does anyone hold their sister like that?’

‘Wouldn’t know. Don’t have a sister.’

‘Cousin, then? Or is that the way with you fancy British elites: keep the Barrett bloodline pure?’

I gave her a shove, causing an outbreak of giggling. Once she’d composed herself, she shook her head. ‘No. Nobody holds their sister like that. The only hold I used on mine was a full nelson.’

‘So, a girlfriend?’

‘I suppose so.’ She patted me on the shoulder. ‘Bad luck, Tom. And the two of you could have been so happy together.’ The joke was distracted; she was still looking at the photograph. ‘Wonder who she was. Wonder why they’re not still together.’

‘Maybe she’s locked away in the City Council basement.’

‘Attic,’ she said. ‘They put mad women in attics, not basements.’

‘She might not be mad.’

She gave a vague nod. ‘That’d work, then.’

The door opened, and Julian stepped back inside. He looked at me first, then with some surprise at Sonia, before his gaze shifted to the framed picture. It was only there

for a moment, and then his eyes had moved quickly from it. Sonia turned towards him, and for the first time since I'd met her looked slightly guilty. For a moment, there was a sense of uncertainty in the room, as though neither of them knew quite what to do or say: presumably a rare occasion for both.

'Any news?' I asked, more to break the silence than out of real interest.

He gave a slight nod. 'Possibly,' he said. 'We'll have to wait and see. But it might have done some good.' I understood that he was being deliberately vague and evasive in front of Sonia: the civilian in the room. She looked at me, puzzled, but didn't ask about it.

I nodded too, putting my empty glass down and checking my watch. It was past eleven. 'It's getting late,' I said, not sure whether I was talking to Julian or Sonia.

Sonia nodded, stifling a yawn. 'Yeah, I've got an early start tomorrow.' She looked at me. 'Taxi? They can drop me off on the way to Gateshead.'

'Sure.' I looked over at Julian, wanting to ask whether everything was alright and not quite sure how I could with Sonia in the room. He seemed to know what I was thinking, and he gave me another short nod, smiling this time.

'Well, thanks for coming, you two. And for sticking around with all of these old boring folks for so long.'

'Thanks for having us,' Sonia said, politely. She held out her hand and Julian shook it. 'It was nice to meet you.'

'Likewise. Have a safe journey back. Tom, I'll see you on Monday.'

Sonia was already through the door, but I stopped, turning back to Julian. I thought I might be able to get an idea of what was going on, but Julian apparently had misread my intentions.

'She was someone from before,' he said, glancing once again at the photograph. 'Someone...important.' For a moment, I thought that he was about to go on, but then he shook his head. 'It doesn't matter.'

I couldn't exactly tell him that I'd not wanted to know about it. In fact, I didn't have much idea what to say. I settled for a nod, then turned away to join Sonia.

On the stairs, I came across Sonia booking the taxi. 'It'll be here in a couple of minutes,' she said. 'So, going to spill and tell me what happened, or am I going to have to get you drunk first?'

'Love the idea of you getting me drunk, to be honest. We can make plans on the way home.'

‘That was more an opportunity for you to tell me everything right now, actually.’

‘Shouldn’t have offered to get me drunk.’

We bickered our way towards the road. As we stood there, waiting, there were suddenly shouts and laughter from one end of the street. We turned, the uproar extremely out of place after the gentle conversation and quiet music of the flat. There was a group of students making their way down the street, swaying slightly as they yelled to each other.

‘God, that brings back some memories,’ Sonia said, reflectively. ‘I didn’t use to head out until this time.’

‘I’m shocked. To think I thought you’d always been a quiet, studious girl.’

She laughed. ‘A quiet studious girl who’d not get home until six in the morning.’

‘Just imagine.’

We quietened as the students drew level with us, lurching past us without a glance on their way towards the city centre. We watched them go, waiting silently for our taxi.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

I had to spend all of Sunday in suspense, waiting to find out what had been discussed during that phone call. I kept one eye on the local papers, but there was nothing about Gateshead Council or Gateshead itself dropping out of devolution. I supposed all I could do was wait for Monday.

Thankfully, Julian was in the office when I arrived, so I wouldn't need to distract myself as I waited for him. He gave me a faint smile, and I stood in front of the desk, waiting.

Julian watched me for a moment. 'What?' he asked, still smiling.

'What did you do? Saturday? The phone call?'

'Ah,' he said. 'Saturday. I called your uncle. Who, by the way, was *not* very happy at being contacted at that hour, even by a lifelong friend.'

I was still lost. 'And what's he going to do?'

Julian yawned. 'The Gateshead Council, or most of it, answers to the Labour Party. So, if I still have any pull with them, which I'd like to think I do, then having a word with some of the Party's more...' He paused, as though looking for a word.

'Important?' I tried.

'*Central* people,' Julian amended, 'then they might be willing to step in and maybe...*encourage* Gateshead Council to make the right choice.'

That made sense, and it seemed morally superior to my blackmail idea. 'And they're doing that now?'

Julian shrugged. 'Hopefully by now. I imagine Andrew probably didn't get started on it on Saturday, it being fairly late then and him being in bed. Sorry for dragging you into it, by the way,' he added, looking slightly guilty. 'I know you were at a party...or supposed to be.'

I shrugged. 'Glad I could help.'

Julian stayed quiet for a moment, and then sighed. 'You know...what really gets me is that people don't seem to care.'

I waited for a moment before asking, 'About what?'

'*This*,' he said, waving his hand vaguely. 'Devolution; Gateshead. The whole thing. Most of the people who *do* care about it, or even have an opinion on it, are the ones I spend most of my time talking to.' He sighed. 'Most of Newcastle, Gateshead, the rest of the North East...they really don't seem bothered. I'll bet some of them don't even

know it's happening. But it *matters*, Tom: it really does matter. It's going to affect them, and the North East; it could set the tone for the next hundred years even. And they don't care.'

'But you do,' I said. 'And you're doing what you can to make sure it goes well. So, I guess, they don't *have* to care.'

'They should.'

'They won't,' I said, feeling more certain in this area. When it came to being cynical about people, I was on reasonably steady ground. 'They've got too much else going on, and most people don't even care about what the actual Government is doing; they're definitely not going to pay attention to whatever the city council's trying to get done. Besides,' I said, after a moment, 'knowing people, do you really want them involved?'

'It's their future; they've got a right to have a say in it.'

I gave a short laugh. 'Yep. But I reckon having a right to have a say should probably mean you've got a responsibility to be informed about the issues. How many people do you think do that? Seriously? Look at Brexit.'

He groaned. 'Christ, don't. The sooner the vote's done with, the sooner I can stop hearing all about "British values" and "what it means to be British". No-one's ever actually told me what those things *are*, funnily enough. Anyway,' he continued, 'my Mum's family were Irish, and British values never did them any good, if I remember my history right.'

I stayed quiet. There was a fair chance that some of my ancestors had played a part in starving, executing or otherwise-persecuting Julian's Mum's relatives, and I didn't want to open that can of worms.

'Politics needs to change,' he mused, after a brief silence. 'People actually need to know what's going on. Otherwise what are they voting for?'

'May as well say that people need to change,' I said. In my opinion, some of them absolutely did, but I didn't say that either. Julian was more optimistic than I was, and there was a part of me which didn't want to change that. It was, after all, that idealism which had made me want to work with him.

'If politics was more open and straightforward, people would be more informed,' he countered. 'And that would be a start, as changes go.'

I nodded. 'But then you'd have to get politicians to change. Which, I'm guessing, might be harder than actual people.' He raised an eyebrow, and I added, 'No offense.'

‘None taken, after careful consideration. And as far as I’m aware, politicians *are* willing to change if it means actually getting elected.’ He paused. ‘Not that I’m condoning selling out, obviously.’

‘What if it’s what the people you’re representing want?’ I asked.

‘I thought you just told me that people are uninformed and so, logically, wouldn’t really know what they want.’ His voice was serious, but I could see a smile playing about his face as he said it.

‘Don’t let anyone else hear you say that,’ I commented. “‘Vote Julian Ashworth for Mayor of the North East, running on a platform of ‘The People Don’t Know What They Want’”.’

He grinned. ‘You’re officially barred from becoming my campaign manager.’

“‘Julian Ashworth, preventing young people of this country from working’,’ I persisted, also smiling.

Julian laughed. “‘Tom Barrett: cheeky bastard, with an admittedly-acceptable taste in whisky and the decency to drink whisky with his co-worker when said co-worker is in a slump’.” He shrugged. ‘There have probably been worse political bios.’

‘I feel like “co-workers” is giving me a fair bit of credit; I wouldn’t want any voters thinking I’d falsified my previous experience.’

Julian looked at me for a moment, some of the humour melting away into seriousness. ‘Friend, then?’

I nodded. ‘Friend.’

\* \* \*

‘You know,’ Sonia said, handing me a large glass of wine, ‘the way you two go on together, I doubt it’ll be too long before you have quite a little romance together. That or you’ll need to have a serious talk with HR about boundaries.’

‘Well, first I’d say you’re reading far too much into the last few days than I am,’ I said, swirling the red wine around my glass. ‘And I was an English Literature student. And secondly, I’m not sure if I could go to HR if what you’re thinking about did happen, seeing as how I don’t technically work there.’

‘No,’ Sonia agreed. ‘You’re the idle rich.’

‘I think they’re a little idler than me,’ I said, starting to root through the shopping bags on Sonia’s kitchen counter. The day had involved a lot of following Julian around on whatever mad schedule of meetings and briefings that he was a slave to; the budget for the next year had been passed, with the predictable amount of fall-out that needed

to be dealt with. I was enjoying sitting down almost as much as I was enjoying the merlot in front of me.

We were in the kitchen of Sonia's flat, and I was unpacking the bags of groceries I'd bought en route to the apartment. She'd had a long day too and had rang me at lunchtime to invite me over for what she described as 'alcohol, with the possibility of food if you feel like cooking'. We had elected to start with wine, over which I had told her about the conversation in Julian's study.

'Plus, it's not the first time I've drunk with him,' I went on. 'Julian just wanted to talk. He seemed stressed out, and I think talking to someone might have helped.'

'And then he rang up the serious players,' Sonia mused, swirling her wine in one hand. 'Interesting move from someone who's trying to gain independence from the rest of the UK.'

'Not exactly independence,' I said. 'Not unless devolution's going to involve a big wall along the North-South divide.'

Sonia snorted, spinning the wine even more rapidly around her glass. 'The Great Wall of Warwick, and Westminster'll make Newcastle pay for it. At least it'd create jobs.'

'Perfectly sound political strategy,' I said. 'Now, what do you want to eat? I've got a bit of everything, really.'

'Anything that's not beef,' Sonia replied. 'Otherwise I'm easy.'

'I can make a chicken stew?'

Sonia considered. 'What's in it?'

'Chicken.'

'Sounds perfect. Raid the fridge for whatever you need.' She kept swirling the wine, getting faster and faster without apparently realising that she was doing so.

'At least you're easily satisfied,' I said, reaching for the scissors. 'And are you going to drink that wine or just arouse it?'

Sonia looked at her wine, and then at me. 'I'm going to be charitable and assume you mean "aerate",' she said. 'Unless your friend from the South has been teaching you some extremely flawed techniques involving arousal.' She held her glass to my mouth like a microphone. 'Care to comment?'

I grinned. 'I don't dare; it'll scupper his chances of becoming Mayor of the North East.'

‘You could write a tell-all autobiography, detailing the torrid love affair between the leader of a city council and the work experience boy. *Fifty Shades of Devolution*.’

I shuddered, starting to cut the chicken. ‘I’ve done pretty well at avoiding scandalous love affairs so far; this is definitely the worst time to start having one.’

‘Are you sure?’ Sonia teased, joining me by the counter. ‘You could alter the entire course of British history. Have your name in the history books, the tabloids: sell your story. There could even be a movie.’

‘You’re not suggesting that Julian wouldn’t be elected Mayor just because he was having a relationship with another man, are you?’

Sonia rolled her eyes, giving me a slight shove. ‘Not at all,’ she said. ‘I’m absolutely certain that personality and relationship plays absolutely no part in politics and election whatsoever. And I’m *completely* sure that an openly-homosexual man would face no opposition at all on the grounds of his sexuality.’

‘You’re a very cynical person.’

‘I had very cynical parents,’ she said. ‘They wanted me equipped for the harsh realities of life, the universe and everything.’

‘I suppose it had to come from somewhere.’

She leaned against me, using me to hold herself up as she tipped the rest of her wine into her mouth. ‘Can’t help but notice you don’t seem to have a very rosy view of people either.’

‘People are idiots,’ I said. ‘Most of them, anyway. There are probably some smart ones, but they’re arseholes. And I think that the few of them who are too smart to be idiots and too nice to be arseholes don’t make a much of an impact.’

Sonia considered this. ‘I can’t decide which is the best category to be in. And I have to say, that’s a lot more cynical than anything I’ve ever said.’

‘You once told me that humanity’s reliance on fossil fuels was going to force the planet to kill us for its own survival.’

‘Yeah, but that’s basically true,’ she said. ‘What you just said there was frigging maudlin. What were *your* parents like?’

I sighed. ‘Long story.’

She checked her watch. ‘It’s only seven,’ she said. ‘We haven’t even had dinner yet. I’ll get us both a cocktail; you get ready to bare your soul and you can at least have a drink while you do it. Fair?’

‘Fair,’ I nodded. Sonia did make a hell of a bartender, and it was probably worth digging into my not-all-that-tragic past to get a cocktail. I watched as she fetched glasses, measured spirits and dropped ice into a shaker, putting the drinks together. I started slicing the onions and other vegetables I’d either bought or scavenged from Sonia’s kitchen, aware that I was supposed to be making dinner. Then I felt a hand on my shoulder and Sonia handed me a wide-rimmed glass.

‘Martini,’ she explained. ‘Vesper Martini, actually, although only sort of one, because they don’t make Kina Lillet anymore. Still, it’s a decent drink.’

I took a sip and happily agreed. ‘You don’t need a flatmate, do you?’ I asked.

Sonia laughed, leaning against the counter. ‘It’s a one-bedroom flat, so that’s a very personal question. Why? Can’t you make yourself cocktails?’

‘Not ones like this,’ I said. ‘Haven’t tried much, really.’

‘It’s easy,’ Sonia said. ‘I’ll lend you my recipe book; you can get drunk by yourself on weekdays and become an alcoholic.’

‘That’s the dream.’ I raised my glass, and she tapped the rim of hers against it, making them chime. ‘Speaking of, this stew’s going to need some white wine if you have any.’

‘I should have some knocking about. Anyway,’ she went on, after a sip, ‘you were going to tell me about your parents, and how they’ve scarred you for life, psychologically.’ She raised an eyebrow, mock-quizzical. ‘Or physically?’

‘Nowhere I can show you.’ I shrugged. ‘It’s nothing extreme. Just weren’t very...satisfactory, I guess.’

‘Damning indictment.’

‘I’m trying to be realistic.’

‘Carry on.’

‘Well...’ It was difficult to put what I was thinking about into words, and the wine I’d had wasn’t making it easier. ‘It was like they didn’t know exactly how to be parents. Growing up, I always felt as though...as though there was something that I’d done wrong, or that I’d made them annoyed somehow. I was always having to watch myself, and there were so many times when I felt as though I’d done something wrong when, actually, I hadn’t.’ I shrugged again. ‘I know it doesn’t sound like a lot, but try and imagine that for twenty-something years. It grinds you down after a while.’

‘I can imagine,’ Sonia murmured.

‘Honestly...it’s been nice to move away,’ I said. ‘Even though it was a big step, I’ve never felt more relaxed than I have now.’

She smiled. ‘Might have something to do with the decent amount of alcohol inside you.’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘I can guess.’ She put her hand gently on my arm. ‘I’m sorry, Tom.’

‘It’s okay.’ I had another sip of Martini: more than I’d meant to. ‘It’s just something I’ve got to deal with. Seriously, it’s fine. People have had worse childhoods.’

‘Yeah,’ Sonia agreed. ‘But, by that logic, barely anyone would be allowed to complain.’

‘And how about your folks? Anything dark and tragic in your past?’

Sonia shook her head. ‘Nothing monumental. Loving yet overprotective parents who want their daughter to be a perfect little angel with a healthy amount of cynicism. Plus one dick of an older sister, but that was just regular sibling stuff: nothing sinister.’

‘Lucky you.’

She leaned over the pot and looked inside before turning back at me with a faint smile. ‘Lucky me.’

We stood together for a while, neither of us moved to say anything, both looking into the other’s eyes. She was so close that I could smell the perfume she was wearing: something subtle and floral. Sonia, still looking at me, started to move a bit closer, and then there was a knock at the door. She stopped herself, taking a step back. ‘Ah,’ she said, smiling a little more. ‘I have a visitor.’

I didn’t say anything. I was still trying to work out what had been about to happen, or if there had even been anything which had been about to happen at all. More and more our time together had seemed to include moments like those: indefinable and never commented upon. Sonia turned away from me quickly, walking towards the stairs which led down to street level.

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘Help me cause a scandal.’

I had no idea what she was talking about, but I followed her. She led me down the flight of stairs, then unlocked the door and pulled it open. On the other side of the door stood a harassed-looking woman who seemed to be well into her seventies. Her eyes darted up to look at me before drifting back down to Sonia and topping an unexpectedly mischievous smile.

‘Not interrupting anything am I, Sonia?’

Sonia smiled calmly, glancing back at me. ‘Not yet, Jean. You could knock again in a couple of hours if you like.’

Jean threw back her grey head and laughed, leaning on the doorframe for support. ‘Oh, that’s what I like to see: girls still behaving badly.’ She looked at me, and beyond the cheer her eyes were suddenly sharply interrogative. ‘You could do a lot worse than this one here, you understand?’ she said.

Sonia laughed too; I stammered for anything to say that might be in the slightest bit appropriate and came up with nothing. The old woman had seemed to expect this, or perhaps had been hoping for it, and turned with a grin back to Sonia.

‘Now, dear, I was wondering if there’d been a parcel dropped off for me.’

Sonia nodded, stooping to pick up a slim cardboard box from where it had lent beside the door and handing it to the old woman. ‘There you are,’ she said. ‘I gave you a knock at five, but you must have been out.’

‘In the city centre,’ Jean confirmed, taking the parcel. ‘Oh lovely: more cardboard to stuff into the bin. You haven’t heard anything from the council have you, Sonia? It’s getting ridiculous.’ She shot me another look. ‘The bloody council haven’t sent anyone to collect the bins for six weeks,’ she informed me, with the air of one denouncing another for some form of war crime. ‘They’re overflowing back there. It’s mad.’

Shaking her head, Sonia said, ‘I’ve emailed; all they’ve said is that they’re currently in discussion with the refuse collection employees.’

“‘Refuse collection employees?’” Jean asked in disgust. ‘Is that what they’re calling binmen now? New bloody name for everything. Anyway,’ she went on, tapping her parcel, ‘I won’t keep you out here. I can see you’re busy.’ She gave Sonia a wink and then retreated from the open door.

Sonia shut the door behind her before spinning around to face me, grinning broadly. ‘Worth the price of admission, right?’

I shook my head. ‘That was terrifying,’ I said. ‘She’s going to think we’re up to all sorts in here now.’

She laughed, taking my arm as we head back upstairs. ‘Not if she knew you called sex “all sorts”, she wouldn’t. Anyway, you’d get nothing without dinner. Is it ready yet?’



It wasn't, and we returned to our places around the stove after returning our martinis to our hands.

'So,' I asked, eventually, 'how did a well-adjusted young lady from a loving, over-protective background turn into this cynical, alcoholic lawyer?'

She laughed. 'The cynicism's probably from a couple of bad relationships. I cultivated the alcoholism myself, in secret.'

'Ah.' I took another drink. 'Well, 'tis better to have loved and lost.'

Sonia looked at me. 'You know who said that?'

'Of course I do; I was an English Literature student. It was Tennyson.'

'Yep. And he was married once, and he died before her, so I reckon he didn't know what the fuck he was talking about.'

'Is it my imagination, or am I sensing a sore spot here?'

'Just...' she sighed. 'Bad memories. Nothing I want to get into. Not now.'

I thought about putting an arm around her but couldn't quite work up the nerve. I settled for saying, 'Sorry.'

'Don't be.' She eased the spoon gently from my hand, shifting the chicken around. 'So, what about you? Any terrible stories of doomed passion, or is it just the parenting?'

'Nothing special, really,' I admitted. 'Never seem to have much luck in that department. Couple of dates, but not anything major.'

'Could have been worse,' she said.

I nodded. 'I know. Could have been better. Or more exciting, anyway.'

She snorted. 'Give it time. See if your blossoming relationship with Julian's any more interesting.'

I laughed as well. 'Promise me you're not going to start spreading that around the Civic Centre. I think if Julian doesn't become North East Mayor, he's not going to want to hear it's because we've been having a secret gay love affair.'

'At least they couldn't blame it on his political platform.'

'Well, if it looks like he's going to go down in flames, you can take a picture of the two of us in a compromising position and leak it to the press.'

Sonia turned to look me up and down in a speculative manner. 'How compromising are we talking? I might have some creative input.'

'Nasty enough to destroy a campaign, but clean enough that the newspapers can print the photo,' I said. 'Let my parents gaze upon their good work.'

‘You didn’t turn out so badly.’

‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘Coming from someone who managed to turn themselves into an alcoholic, that’s a really good thing to hear.’

Sonia raised her glass, and I tapped mine against it. ‘Cheers,’ she said.

The chicken was nicely browned, so I added the wine and stock to the pot. ‘Shouldn’t be long,’ I said. ‘About half an hour, if you can survive that long.’

‘In which case let’s move into the study.’ She led me through into the living room: a tiny space which could just about fit in a sofa, a television and a stack of dense legal volumes, shot through occasionally by what seemed to be mostly Jane Austen or Anne Rice novels.

‘The study?’ I asked, seating myself down on the sofa, careful not to tip the books over.

‘This is where I work. Ergo, this is a study. Mind the books.’ Sonia lowered herself onto the seat beside me, the size of the sofa ensuring that we were pushed close together.

‘You should get a shelf.’

‘I have a perfectly legitimate storage system.’

‘A system which involves mixing law books and romance novels?’ I asked, indicating the pile.

‘When you’ve had to slog through a load of legal knowledge, most of which is frankly a hell of a lot more complicated than it needs to be, then I think you’d be in the mood for a bit of light romance and maybe heavy petting too,’ Sonia replied in an unconcerned tone. ‘Keeps me from drowning in names, numbers, dates and detail. Gives me a chance to retain some connection to humanity.’

‘And what does that make me?’

‘Oh, that goes for you too,’ she said. ‘I don’t think I could cope with a life which was wall-to-wall law and litigation. Every so often I need a night out or an evening in. Something to break up all the tedium. And conversation helps.’

‘Nice to know I can be of assistance.’

She patted my leg reassuringly. ‘You fulfil a vital role: don’t worry.’ She paused. ‘How about you?’

‘What about how about me?’

‘You’re pretty involved with politics and the council and all that jazz. Don’t you feel like you need to have a bit of breathing room? Something where it’s not all drudge and detail?’

I shrugged. ‘Julian keeps it interesting, I suppose. But there are some times when I do let the numbers and regulations slip out of my head a little. And I see you, of course.’

‘A pleasant interlude, I’m sure,’ Sonia said, sipping a martini.

‘Absolutely. Drink, a conversation about something that’s not politics and very pleasant company. Gives me the strength to keep on going.’

Sonia laughed. ‘You charmer, you. I should get you drunk more often.’

‘All you ever do is get me drunk.’

She settled back comfortably against me. ‘Then we shouldn’t change anything just now, should we?’

\* \* \*

Sunlight filtered in through a gap in the curtains. My first thought was how odd that was, because my bedroom window didn’t face the sunrise.

There was a movement behind me, and I turned. Next to me, in the bed, was Sonia, still apparently asleep.

Ah.

Memories, or what remained of them, of the night before crept back into my memories. There had been dinner, and then more drinks, and a movie I couldn’t remember. That was as much as I could dredge up, but it didn’t take a genius to fill in the rest of the details.

I turned myself back around and checked under the covers. I was still wearing underwear, which confirmed my suspicions. I swivelled back around to face Sonia, and this time her eyes were open.

‘Planning on doing a runner?’ she murmured, sleepily.

‘Depends,’ I said. ‘Exactly how did the night end?’

She gave me a smile. ‘Are you trying to ask me if we had sex a couple of hours ago?’

‘I think I’d remember that,’ I said. ‘I was trying to work out if there was an embarrassing reason I stayed over, or...?’

Sonia yawned. 'If I remember right, the only way you were going to get back to your place was if you took a taxi, so I told you to crash here: seemed like a waste of money and I wasn't cruel enough to make you sleep on that unholy sofa.'

'Ah, right,' I said, not able to work out if I was relieved or not. 'Thanks.'

'No problem,' she yawned again. 'Then again, with your desire to sleep with city council employees, I can see why you'd ask.'

I smiled. 'Disappointed?'

'Devastated.' She pushed herself up onto her arm, revealing that she was wearing a black t-shirt. At least one of us had stayed decent. 'How's your head?'

I took a moment to think about it. I had an unfortunate knowledge of how deceptive hangovers could be once you weren't eighteen anymore. All too often I'd made the mistake of thinking that everything was going to be alright, only to get three steps and start regretting it.

'I think I'll survive,' I said. 'Or I'll at least make it to breakfast.'

Sonia started to sit up and then winced, touching her head gingerly. 'Ah, fuck. That last Margherita was a mistake. I didn't say anything embarrassing or...hate-speechy whilst I was drunk, did I?'

'You're asking the wrong person,' I admitted. 'I remember right up until the French 75, and that's all there is.'

'Lightweight,' said Sonia, yawning. 'I can remember the Negroni.'

'Negroni?' I asked, surprised. 'I didn't think we...' I stopped, noticing her grin. 'Oh, well done.'

'Well, I wasn't trying to poison you or anything,' she said, sitting up and grimacing. 'The room's sort of spinning. And my head hurts. And I really want some water, but I don't reckon I'll make it all the way to the tap.'

I smiled. 'Is that a gentle hint?'

'Tom?'

'Sonia?'

'Would you please be so kind as to get me a fucking glass of water?'

'My pleasure.' I slipped out of bed, conscious of the one article of clothing I was wearing but grateful that, considering I *was* only wearing one article of clothing, the article in question was a pair of underwear. Logistically, it was for the best.

As I straightened up, Sonia gave a wolf-whistle. I ignored that, trying to keep what dignity a man wearing only boxer shorts can. After stumbling around her flat –

whatever alcohol was still in my system was playing merry hell with my balance – I managed to ferry two glasses of water back up to Sonia.

She was still in bed, her eyes shut. She opened them when I came in, and she pulled the covers back. ‘Get in: cover yourself up if you must.’

I did as she said, handing her the water and taking a long sip of mine. Sonia did the same, draining the entire glass in one continuous drink. She sighed. ‘God, that’s a lot better. Thanks. Now I need coffee. And a shower. And something fried for far too long.’ She raised the glass to her lips before realising that there wasn’t anything in it. ‘And some more water. Lucky for me, I know a place that does an amazing breakfast.’ She glanced at me for a moment. ‘And lucky for you too, because I’ve got a big old heart, and I’m willing to let you buy me breakfast even though we didn’t have sex.’

‘That’s incredibly good of you,’ I said. ‘If you’re any nicer to me, we’ll have to have sex.’

‘Promises promises,’ Sonia said, evenly. ‘Now shut your eyes until I’m out of the room, because I’ve got no idea what I’m wearing under this blanket and the moment, quite frankly, has passed.’

\* \* \*

It was over an hour before we were sitting in a quiet café, washed, dressed and tucking into breakfast sandwiches which had probably led to the death of at least five pigs between them. Neither of us had wanted to exit the shower after climbing into it, and it had taken Sonia running all the hot taps she’d had access to before I’d given up.

‘There’s your other big political event coming up,’ she said, nodding at a television screen on which a newsreader was addressing the possibility of Britain leaving the European Union.

I nodded, remembering mentioning the same thing to Julian. ‘Referendum in June. Then we can finally forget about it and move on with life.’

‘Yep,’ Sonia said. ‘Concentrate on the more important things, like crowbarring the North East away from England.’

‘There’s a difference.’

‘I know,’ she said, through a mouthful of bacon sandwich. ‘They’re actually asking the people if they want Brexit.’

‘That could be a mistake. Ever met people?’

Sonia thought for a moment. ‘What, like actual people, or the people people talk about when they say “the people”?’

‘The second one.’

‘Of course not,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘They don’t exist; they’re just an imaginary group that politicians can talk about. So, no: I haven’t met them.’

‘Fine, have you met the average person?’

‘I used to work in a coffee shop,’ she answered, gesturing to the one surrounding us. ‘I met incredibly average people all the time.’

‘Would you want them making decisions? Important decisions? Decisions about the future of the country?’

‘I wasn’t happy letting them make decisions about their cappuccinos,’ Sonia said. ‘But who’s going to stand up and say that they don’t have a right to have their voices heard? Not a politician, that’s for certain.’

‘What if they were honest?’

Sonia smiled, sipping some more coffee. ‘Then they wouldn’t get that far in politics. How’s your head?’

‘Better thanks to this breakfast. Which, I suppose, also means thanks to you. Although seeing as how you gave me this hangover in the first place, I guess that puts you back to square one.’

‘You knew what you were getting into when you got here,’ Sonia said. ‘In political terms, I stood on a platform of getting a friend drunk; everything else was implied in that initial campaign promise.’

‘I thought last night was supposed to be a break from politics and law,’ I said. ‘Breaking up the boredom with alcohol and going to bed together.’

Sonia shook her head firmly. ‘That was a lie. It was all political, just subtly and completely symbolic.’

‘In which case, I’m glad we didn’t have sex,’ I said, grinning through the fuzzy headache. ‘God knows what that would have meant in political terms.’

‘Are you this nice every morning after, Tom?’

‘I thought we’d established that I haven’t had that many morning afters.’

Sonia nodded. ‘Yeah, something about that sounds familiar. If it helps, Julian might always make you a nice breakfast one of these days.’

‘You’ve really got to stop pushing this speculative gay fantasy of yours.’

‘I’m just trying to find you some action in this quiet, quaint little region.’

‘And was letting me spend the night in your bed an attempt to keep me on the straight and narrow?’

‘Potentially straight, but I’ve never been accused of having a narrow outlook in that area,’ Sonia commented, moving her fork back away from her mouth. ‘Disgusting breakfast conversation, by the way.’

I nodded. ‘Disgusting because of me, or Julian?’

‘Oh, absolutely you,’ she said. ‘Julian’s got amazing hair. For a politician.’

‘This whole conversation is doing wonders for my self-esteem,’ I said, throwing back my third double espresso. ‘But I should actually head home. Possibly get some sleep that’s not, you know, marinated in alcohol.’

‘That’s no way to live,’ Sonia commented. ‘But I have some stuff to do as well. Not sleeping, because I’m not an unemployed layabout.’

‘Hey, I’m only unemployed because immigrants are taking all the jobs,’ I said, slipping on my jacket. ‘That’s why I’ll be voting Leave in order to get back the Britain I love and miss.’

‘Well, in the spirit of leaving the EU, you can now leave my presence. And all the alcohol, coffee and food that you benefit from in our relationship.’ Sonia tipped her mug back, emptying it in one swig.

‘I’ll just get my own alcohol, coffee and food,’ I said. ‘Create a stronger nation with its own resources.’

‘Seriously, Tom, go home.’

‘Yep.’

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The following months were a blur of long days, late nights and frothing rhetoric. Against the backdrop of the looming EU referendum, day-to-day life slowly seemed to lose its volume and colour. It was, after all, trying to compete against an ever-shifting swirl of non-stop shouting. Everyone, gradually, was becoming infuriated with someone else. Several segments of the far-right hated immigrants and refugees; the other Leave voters were embarrassed by those far-right groups they were lumped in beside whilst resenting the far-left (who were primarily responsible for the lumping). Everyone on the Remain side deplored Leave voters, although they reserved a similar level of contempt for their own campaign.

As much as I could, I did my best to avoid the entire issue. I'd already made my choice, was entirely certain that no-one was going to change my mind and had no real desire to engage with people on a subject which, it seemed, to be taking over more and more of my day.

Julian regarded the entire affair with disdain. From the start, he'd scorned the idea of the referendum and had held himself aloof from that point on. When we saw any of the demonstrators on the street, Julian's only reaction was a slight sigh and a shake of the head, something which happened more and more as the date of the referendum approached. He was far more concerned with devolution, which seemed to be limping on even without Gateshead, and with arranging some sort of deal regarding refuse collection. The referendum, in his eyes, was little more than a distraction.

The closer the day came, the more and more everything else seemed to fade into the background. In the final week, even Julian seemed to be increasingly distracted by the noise, although his refusal to engage with it remained as resolute as ever. I was just waiting for it all to end: the entire country becoming political experts overnight had begun to grate after the third day, and it had been going on for so much longer than that.

On the day of the referendum itself, I'd dragged myself out of the flat early and reaffirmed my commitment to EU membership before throwing myself into the day. Julian, in a similar state of mind, had made sure that our duties wouldn't force us to leave the Civic Centre and planned for us to barricade ourselves within until the madness was well and truly over, or at least until quitting time.



He made what calls needed making, answered emails and had consumed three pots of coffee, each one stronger than the last. I could only assume that by the end of the year I'd be supplying the Leader of Newcastle City Council with cocaine as a cost-saving measure. I waited until I could actually see the slight tremors of his hands before asking me if there was anything the matter.

'Besides the biggest decision in...God, I couldn't say how long being made right now?' He smiled wanly. 'It's just something. To be here and feel it. Everything's going on as normal, but you can feel it. Almost like it's in the walls. Or the air. I can't relax.'

I looked pointedly at what I was absolutely certain was his sixth cup of coffee. I had, after all, been the one making them. He followed my eyes and his smile took on a little more life. Nothing like his usual charm and warmth, but the best I could probably expect under the circumstances.

'You don't think it's going to go the other way, do you?' I asked.

'God, no,' he said. 'If I thought that was likely I'd already be in Westminster, holding your uncle hostage and issuing my Europhilic demands. It's only a little madder than how some people have been acting.'

'You pick a pretty bad choice of target,' I commented. 'Not a lot of people would abandon democracy for my uncle.'

'They've not heard his impression of the Prime Minister.' He stood up from the desk suddenly, and I steeled myself for the news that we were heading out into the political fervour on the streets. Once up, however, Julian stayed where he was, as if uncertain about what the movement intended. 'I haven't heard from Jeremy in two weeks,' he said, only partly to me. 'I've been trying to get hold of him too, just to bounce some ideas off him. It's never been this hard to get his attention.'

'He's got a lot on his mind,' I pointed out, this display of nerves starting to alarm me. 'This is a pretty busy time for him.'

'For everyone,' he agreed with a sigh. 'Everyone except us.' He began to sit down, hesitated, and then went through with it, sinking back into his chair. 'This is insane.' He looked at the clock on the wall. 'And this can't be fun for you. Go on,' he waved a hand. 'Push off: go to the cinema or whatever it is young people do instead of voting.'

'Get drunk and have massive amounts of promiscuous, unprotected sex,' I said, pulling on my jacket. I wasn't going to argue with an opportunity to find somewhere less tense to spend my time. I'd managed to enlarge the bar in my flat to a fair degree

and hadn't put near enough the dent in it that I'd planned to: I'd actually started making a net gain in alcohol, to my horror.

'Ah,' Julian said, glancing at a file he'd dragged, apparently, from the very bottom of the pile of his desk and making a dramatic show of blowing non-existent dust off its cover. 'I trust things are going well with your friend in the legal department?'

'Yes,' I admitted, 'but not in the way you're thinking. We're just friends. Friends who get drunk together occasionally.'

'I always thought that getting drunk together was the definition of being a friend,' he commented. 'Well, whatever you do in your free time is entirely up to you. As long as I can occasionally benefit from your alarmingly good nose for whisky.'

'Wouldn't have it any other way,' I said, pulling on my jacket. 'Are you sure you'll be alright without me? Not going to throw yourself out of a window or take the Trading Standards department hostage?'

'No,' he said, still looking absently through the folder. 'I might just make it quietly until five o'clock and then find a quiet little bar to hide away in.'

I nodded, leaving him in the office.

If at all possible, I wanted to avoid people. Unfortunately, in the city centre of Newcastle upon Tyne on a Thursday afternoon, I might as well have wished for a private jet and my own airport to keep it in. It was as though the world had come to Newcastle that day, although they seemed to have retail on their minds more than referendums. It was a relief to see that political inflammation was still no match for all the iPhones, hoverboards and *Game of Thrones* box sets that the world could offer. In a very cynical way, it gave you hope that the country hadn't gone mad just yet.

Well, not any madder than it had been already.

Northumberland Street was particularly crowded, although in my experience there were very few times when that wasn't the case. People of every height, weight, shade of colour and, I supposed, political opinion were bustling almost shoulder-to-shoulder together. I wondered how many different nationalities was in that crowd: how many religions and sexual orientations.

With a lack of anything more productive to do, and not able to face starting to drink at three in the afternoon, I spent a few hours wandering from shop to shop, occasionally considering buying a small, useless item before putting it back down and moving on. It was a surprisingly effective form of meditation, even with the multitudes of my fellow shoppers around me.

When my clock was finally showing five, and I'd managed to disappoint more earnest shop assistants than I could count, I finally pulled out my phone and made a call.

Sonia answered on the second ring. *'Is it bad?'* she asked, without preamble. *'Did he assault a Leave campaigner? Is he planning to bulldoze the other side of Eldon Square? Did he put his hand on your knee?'*

'Fuck off,' I said, smiling ruefully. 'I was ringing to invite you out to drinks. This whole referendum thing's been giving me some bad vibes. Well,' I amended, 'it's been giving Julian bad vibes, and he's been stalking around the office like an angry cat. I need to get drunk: possibly very drunk. Do you fancy it?'

*'Does the Pope shit in the woods?'*

'I wouldn't have the slightest idea,' I said. 'I'm Church of England. But I am also quite possibly a functioning alcoholic, and I'm trying to be a social one too. Are you in?'

*'Fuck, sure I am. Where are we going?'*

I hesitated. 'Wouldn't have any idea about that either,' I admitted. 'You know this place far better than I do. Anywhere doing Remain-themed cocktails?'

*'Might be setting your sights a little high, I'm afraid. But if it's cocktails you want, I know a few places. Right...'* I heard a rustle as, on the other end, Sonia apparently rearranged things, *'there's a bar called Alvino's on Pilgrim Street. Have you learned where Pilgrim Street is yet?'*

'The one with the theatre, right?'

Sonia sighed. *'You're incredibly bad at being a Geordie, you know that?'*

'Yes,' I agreed. 'But I'll be able to find the place one way or another. See you there?'

*'Yep,'* she replied. *'Give me about ten minutes and try not to get drunk before I get there, if you do find it.'*

'TTFN.'

Twelve minutes later, Sonia half-barged, half-fell through the door of the bar. I'd already found us a table, back from the windows and surrounded by a long, cushioned bench.

'Hey hey,' she said, spotting me and making her way over. 'How was your day avoiding political opinions?'

‘Short,’ I said. ‘He let me go early. Trying to get work done at the same time that history could possibly be being made was getting to him.’

‘Huh.’ Sonia slid the menu out from in front of me, scanning the contents. ‘I should have tried that for an excuse. You’ll never know true boredom until you’ve read through licensing law cases. And, as far as I’m aware, history possibly being made didn’t make it any more interesting.’

‘You should have been a doctor and made your parents proud.’

‘I don’t do well with blood, and there’s probably more money in lawyering right now. By the by, is this a real break from politics, or is this one of those ones that seems like it’s a break or is actually really politically significant if you pay attention?’

‘Well, it’s the evening of the EU referendum,’ I said. ‘I think we’d have to do some pretty mad stuff for it not to be political one way or another.’

‘Fair enough,’ she said. ‘I’ll be careful not to indulge in any casual hate speech, then.’ She leaned forward, frowning at one cocktail in particular. ‘What in the hell is a “Basil Fawlty”?’

‘Vodka, pineapple, basil, passion fruit, coconut and lime,’ I said, reading the description.

‘Sounds like an ominous way to start,’ Sonia commented. ‘I’ll get us two of them.’ She set off towards the bar before I could reply, and I sank back into my seat, smiling. Of all the places I could possibly avoid the real world for the next twelve hours, and of the people I could avoid it with, I felt as though I’d done rather well.

She ferried two large glasses over a minute later, brimming with ice and cocktail.

‘Cheers,’ I said, taking mine and having an experimental sip. ‘Not bad. Although, considering that *Fawlty Towers* is a British institution, this is a weird start for two pro-Remainers.’

‘Have a Vesper next time. I did ask if they could make it,’ Sonia commented, taking a drink herself. ‘Russian vodka, Italian vermouth and English gin. Transnational.’ She drank again. ‘I might stick with this; it’s got a certain something.’

‘Jingoism?’

‘Either that or the pineapple. So,’ she leaned back in her seat, keeping her hand on her glass, ‘we came here, I thought, to hide from the referendum and all of the horrifying possibilities and implications thereof. And yet all we’ve talked about is that. Our subtle politics don’t seem that subtle.’

‘I suppose not,’ I admitted. ‘I’m having trouble keeping it off my mind. Why I’m planning on getting fairly drunk tonight: seeing if I can crowd it out of my head.’

‘Fair plan.’ She went to say something else, but then her eyes widened slightly, before a slight grin began to grow. ‘Might want to hit the brakes for *just* a second, though, and direct your attention to the front door.’

I looked at her, and then at the doorway, and sighed in disbelief at the sight of Julian moving towards the bar. ‘Amazing,’ I said. ‘You get out of the office to try and get away from politics, and it follows you to the bar.’

‘Well, everything’s political,’ Sonia pointed out, her smile almost from ear to ear. ‘You did just make my drink order a xenophobic statement, after all. What’s the matter? Worried I’ll tell him that we spent the night in bed together? Think he’d be jealous?’

‘I swear, if you make him think that I’m interested in him...’ At that exact moment, Julian turned, and we locked eyes. ‘Alright, seriously, shut up.’ From across the bar, I caught his look of surprise before he paid for his drink and started to walk over. With a supreme effort, Sonia managed to compose herself, although I could still feel her shaking with suppressed laughter.

‘Well now,’ Julian said, as he reached us. ‘If I’d known that you were going to pitch up here as well, I’d have taken myself to a classier establishment. Sorry for intruding on your night.’

‘It’s alright,’ I said. ‘This was a spur of the moment idea: just avoiding the news, and this seemed like a good way to do it.’

‘I had the same idea.’ He turned to Sonia. ‘Good to see you again,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry: I don’t make a habit of stalking your friend.’ He’d managed to put the tiniest of pauses between the words ‘your’ and ‘friend’: enough that if you were expecting something like it, which I had been, you’d catch it.

Sonia seemed to have caught it too. ‘Nice to see you too,’ she said. ‘Thanks again for the party invite; I had a really good time. And I think Tom does need a bit of an eye keeping on him.’

Had I been able to kick her under the table without attracting Julian’s attention, I’d have done it. All I could do was smile and hope my face wasn’t reddening.

Julian laughed. ‘Well, I try to keep him as busy as possible: keep him off the streets and the drugs and all that.’

‘Not out of bars, though?’ Sonia asked.

‘God, no. He wants to be a politician, doesn’t he?’ Julian glanced at our drinks. ‘And I have to ask, what on earth are you both drinking? Looks far too colourful to be healthy.’

‘They’re called a “Basil Fawlty”,’ I said, happy for any opportunity to steer the conversation away from me. ‘They’re actually not bad.’

‘I’ll take your word for it,’ Julian commented, raising his own drink – what appeared to be a double whisky – in a salute. ‘Don’t worry: I was just stopping in for a quick one here before going home. Unlike you carefree youngsters, I reckon I’ll be staying up to watch the results come in. So, if I fall asleep at work tomorrow, you know why.’

‘Would you like to join us while you’re here?’ Sonia asked. Julian accepted cheerfully, and then the three of us were sat at the table together.

The next half-hour was incredibly enjoyable. Julian displayed what seemed to be genuine interest in Sonia’s career ambitions, offering to put her in touch with several acquaintances he’d made in the legal world. The pair of them also bonded over their shared Irish heritage: Julian and his parents had lived their entire lives in England, but he had visited Enniskillen, where Sonia had spent her first few years. They both regarded what Sonia called ‘the old country’ with real affection, and for a while I was happy just to listen to the pair of them talking. It wasn’t until the talk turned, inexorably, towards politics that I joined in again.

Julian was quick, once again, to reassure us about the referendum. ‘It’s nothing to worry about,’ he said. ‘Leave’s making a lot of noise because it’s always easy to when you’re in the opposition: you’re arguing for things to be different; you can point to every bad thing that’s happened and say that it’s a result of what you’re opposing. Trust me: when the chips are down, and people actually have to make a decision, then they’ll back away from any huge changes. The traditional way of doing things always ends up winning out. The bookies know it, and so do politicians.’

‘I suppose you’d better hope so,’ Sonia said, taking the final drink of her Basil Fawlty. ‘I hear the North East benefits a fair bit from European money. And I reckon this devolution thing’ll need some pretty serious cash.’

‘Extremely serious,’ Julian agreed. ‘Somewhere in the realm of, oh, at least thirty million for thirty years. Which the treasury doesn’t have a hope in hell of covering, so yes: we’d be, to put it in political terms, completely fucked.’

‘Except you don’t think that it’ll happen,’ I said.

Julian shook his head. 'Not a chance. If I thought it was, I'd be having a lot more than just one double whisky.'

'Jameson?' Sonia asked, with a sideways glance at me.

'Ardbeg,' said Julian. 'This one,' he added, nodding at me, 'was kind enough to introduce me to it.'

'He said you had some in the study,' Sonia said. 'Along with some Disraeli novels. You're a fan?'

Julian shrugged. 'It's probably breaking some Labour Party rule, but I'm afraid I am. It's nice to read a political novel written by a politician.'

'What about Trollope?' asked Sonia. 'He's even from the old country.'

Making a face, Julian shook his head. 'Nowhere near as good,' he said. 'Didn't know anywhere near enough about politics to write about it. That's why it's all propped up with romance: patched up so people didn't notice all the gaps in his knowledge.'

Sonia shrugged. 'If I wanted to read a novel, I'd like one with a bit of romance in it, not just politics.'

'Or politicians?' Julian asked, laughing.

She smiled. 'I think Disraeli wrote *for* politicians. If I wanted a commentary on the state of the nation, I'd read a manifesto.'

'Whereas Trollope?'

Sonia shrugged. 'I'd say that Trollope knew that there was more to life than politics, and that you get the feeling that his characters are more human because politics isn't the only thing they ever think about; there's more to offer.'

Julian seemed to think that over for a moment, then took another sip of his drink. 'Some might not agree with you.'

'Politicians?'

'Maybe.'

There was a slight pause. Again, I got the unsettling feeling that this silence was giving Julian and Sonia the chance to weigh each other up, as though after every exchange they had cause to re-evaluate before deciding what they would say next. Maybe that was how it was when it came to politicians and lawyers: a single unwise word could be used against them and might discredit everything that they were saying. Maybe it made you less inclined to relax. Sonia and Julian, I reminded myself, didn't know each other as well as they knew me.

After a moment, Sonia shrugged. 'I guess to each their own,' she said. 'I mostly use books to forget about work; we're probably approaching it from different angles.'

Julian looked at Sonia for a moment, and then he nodded. 'Probably we are.' After another brief pause, he glanced at his watch, and then at the street outside. 'And I'm afraid that's me. I've a television to sit in front of and a bed not to go to.' He brought out his wallet and laid a crisp new twenty on the table. 'Your next...' he looked down at the menu, 'four cocktails are on me. Enjoy escapism, shutting out the world, and do try not to bring that great institution, the City Council of Newcastle upon Tyne, into disrepute. However in the world that might be possible.' He gave Sonia a nod which was almost a bow. 'I'm glad Tom knows someone who can show him a good time in this city.' And with that, he turned away from the table, and walked through the bar and out of the front door.

Sonia sat in silence for a moment, watching the doorway Julian had just left through. Then, a musing tone of voice, she said: 'You know, I'm beginning to understand why you're so impressed by him. He's an interesting man.'

'I don't think I've ever said that.'

She rolled her eyes. 'Please. You didn't have to. Anyone could tell. Well,' she amended, after a moment, 'anyone who pays attention.'

'Oh? So you pay attention to me?'

She levelled a look at me, surprisingly serious. 'Tom. We're friends. You're the only friend I really see that much, and I *know* I'm the only friend that you've made here. I do pay attention.'

There wasn't an easy reply to that, so I finished my drink instead. 'I feel like I could have done without the whole "no friends" comment,' I said, out of a need to stick up for myself.

Sonia patted me on the leg. 'I didn't say you didn't have friends,' she said. 'I said that I was the only one you'd made in Newcastle. Do you think you can accept that?'

I sighed, a little theatrically. 'I suppose so,' I said. 'If I was convinced, over several more extremely alcoholic drinks.'

She smiled, pushing Julian's note towards me. 'Great minds think alike. Go and spend your sugar daddy's money.'

\* \* \*

Our next port of call, following a quick call to a takeaway, was another bar, which shouldn't have come as a surprise. Sonia had recovered some of her received



pronunciation now that the pizza had sobered her up, and she was walking more steadily.

The bar itself was where we'd gone on our first night out: the Glass House. We were brought up short when we stepped inside, confronted by both a wall of sound and the cause of it: a man in a mostly-open shirt, crooning 'Your Sex is On Fire' in what had probably started out life as a Geordie accent.

Sonia and I looked at each other and dissolved into laughter, which was thankfully drowned out by the sheer level of noise the singer was producing. We made our way over to the bar and, after several attempts, managed to shout for two double Ardbegs and flee to the whisky lounge, blessedly away from the song and all of its many flaws.

'Christ,' she said. 'I've heard rabbits screaming and it didn't sound anywhere near as bad as that. Who the fuck hired him?'

'Clearly the owner's torturing someone in the basement and wanted something to drown out the screams. Or the same thing, but with sex.'

'Putting those two things together is really making me wonder about your fetishes,' Sonia said, sinking down into the sofa. She patted the space beside her. 'You are going to be able to control yourself, aren't you? I know it's a very stressful night.'

'I should just manage to make it,' I said. 'Even if it *is* very quiet in here.'

'I could always ask the barman if he could lock the doors,' she offered, 'just in case the leader of Newcastle City Council comes in here too.'

'I don't think I could face him now,' I said. 'And definitely not with you here. He probably already thinks I've got a crush on him.'

'Well, you are very impressed by him.'

'How about we talk about something that isn't politics or either of our sex habits?' I suggested, sipping the whisky. It didn't taste as strong as I remembered, although I supposed it was struggling with a lot of other alcohol.

'I wasn't aware that we'd ever talked about my sex habits.'

'Would you like to?'

She tossed her hair dramatically. 'You couldn't handle it.'

'Well then.'

Sonia took a drink, emptying half her tumbler. 'Well, what else is there to talk about? Everything's political and everything's sexual, if taken to its extremes.'

'We could always not take things to their extremes.'

‘That’s no way to live.’ She sighed dramatically. ‘*Fine*. What would you *like* to talk about?’

‘No idea,’ I admitted. ‘I thought you might know something.’

She gave it some thought. ‘You could explain the offside rule.’

‘Girls aren’t allowed to know that.’

‘You don’t know, do you?’

‘Haven’t the foggiest.’

‘That’s it.’ She slapped her hand on the table, harder than she’d intended. ‘Sex. Politics. Sex and politics. The only worthwhile things in the world.’

‘Alcohol?’

‘Also acceptable,’ Sonia conceded. ‘Sex, alcohol and politics.’

I shrugged, unable to find a decent argument against it. ‘What else does anyone need?’

‘Well, I actually need the bathroom.’ She stood up, wobbling slightly on the way. ‘Watch my drink.’

‘We’re the only ones here,’ I said, as she mounted the stairs. ‘What could happen to it?’

‘You could fucking drink it.’ The door shut behind her.

I lay back on the sofa. Things had taken a weird turn. Not because Sonia had gotten drunk and wouldn’t stop talking about sex: that was almost a regular Saturday night by now. But even through the haze of alcohol which, now that I thought about it, really did seem to be a lot more solid than ten minutes ago, there was an odd feeling. There was no sign of it in the streets and no mention of it on the television, but the referendum was *there*, somehow: in the atmosphere. The possibility that everything, or as near to everything that it made no difference, was capable of changing. That what we knew now could be swept away, and what might have been an entirely normal Thursday evening might, in the fullness of time, be seen as the first step to a momentous period of history.

It felt, to me at least, as though Britain had spent the last several weeks taking in a breath and was now holding it.

Then again, I was four and a half drinks under, so my opinion probably wasn’t worth much right now.

I finished the rest of my whisky. That had been a very serious thought, which wasn’t what tonight was supposed to be about. I wondered what my family was doing, right

now. I hadn't talked to them in over a week, my parents being practical enough to assume that, if something terrible had happened, I would have gotten in touch. Would they be settling in to watch the news, or would they be happy to simply go to bed on one side of the decision and wake up on the other? Would Uncle Andrew be closeted somewhere with other political figures, waiting to see what direct democracy had achieved? Was there a party at which he could lean awkwardly against the wall and someone whom he could trade monosyllables with?

Was Julian already sitting in front of the television? Had he managed to get in touch with Corbyn?

I was shaken out of my reverie as Sonia walked back through the door, holding two more whiskies. She put one in front of me, carrying the other one back around the table as she sat down.

'Wow,' I said, focusing on the glass. 'Must be a hell of a ladies room.'

'I assumed that you'd have drunk my whisky to get back at me telling you not to,' she said. 'So I got these two and was going to drink them in front of you. Only you didn't, so I won't.'

'Much obliged,' I said. 'This should probably be my last for a while: I was having some pretty serious thoughts back then.'

'Political or sexual?'

'The former.'

'Ah. Worrying about it?'

I hesitated. 'Not *worried*, I guess. A little anxious, but it's more...well, Julian's right. This is a big moment, no matter what happens. Historic. It's just...it's a lot to get my head around. You don't think you're going to be around for stuff like this; you just expect things to work without you really noticing.'

Sonia stayed quiet for a while, apparently running through her head what I'd been saying. I wondered if it made any more sense to her than it did to me.

'Fuck,' she said. 'Let's watch it.'

'What? I thought the whole idea was to avoid it. That's why we're getting drunk.'

'Tom, we *are* drunk. Mostly. And it's not working. All we've talked about tonight is politics and sex. We're not avoiding anything, even if we've been trying to. And like you say, this is a big thing. Hopefully it'll be the biggest political thing that will actually happen in our lives. So, let's actually pay attention when it does happen.'

I stared at her, and then nodded. 'Right. Screw it. Where?'

‘Well, I’ve got no coffee and not much for breakfast; how about we make it your place? I can grab my stuff and be at yours in an hour?’

‘Right. Deal.’ I raised my glass. ‘To history.’

Sonia clinked her own against it. ‘And all who sail in her.’

## CHAPTER NINE

I managed to sober up a little, or at least get more acclimatised to the alcohol in my system, on the bus ride home. And while I managed to put a couple of scratches in the door handle whilst trying to fit the key in the lock, all in all I wasn't a complete wreck.

I flicked through channels until I found the news, and then set to work making a pot of coffee, both to ease the alcohol's effects a little more and to help us stay mostly conscious for the long night ahead.

Sonia arrived not too long after I did, and I greeted her at the door with her mug. 'Ah, fantastic,' she said, taking a sip. 'Almost fell asleep on the bus. Hope you've got a lot more of this.'

'Enough. Television's already on, broadcasting history as we speak.'

'Then let's go and see it.'

We settled ourselves in front of the television. It was five minutes past ten, which meant that everything would be getting underway soon.

'Polls say it'll be Remain by a little,' said Sonia, working herself into a comfortable position.

'Good.'

'Except this means we'll have stayed up all night and be in rough shape tomorrow just to watch things just go on as normal,' she pointed out. 'Which some people might call a bad reason to stay up.'

'I thought we were watching history unfold.'

'We are,' Sonia said. 'Except one kind of history's exciting, new and different, and the other kind is going to involve me spending all tomorrow pounding espresso and wondering what the hell I was thinking.'

'At least you'll be pounding espresso and wondering what the hell you were thinking in the EU.'

'I suppose.'

We lapsed into silence, watching the television anchor repeat what had been said again and again over the past few months, occasionally heckling the reporters, politicians and professors who appeared, but otherwise giving our full attention to what was happening in front of us, as though we were afraid of missing it. The coffee soon began to work against whatever alcohol was left in us which, combined with the lights and the television, helped make sure that we stayed awake.

We'd been watching for almost an hour before the results finally started to come in.

'Well, this is it,' Sonia murmured. 'Fate of the country about to be decided.'

'And we're sitting here, mostly drunk.'

'Like most of the Commons isn't drinking right now.'

'Good for them.'

We went quiet again, raising our coffee mugs in unison when the BBC advised us that it seemed that the Remain campaign would just edge through.

Finally, we were taken to Gibraltar, where almost twenty thousand people voted to Remain. 'Well, they would,' Sonia said. 'Only question is, who voted out?'

'It's an inside job,' I suggested. 'Bunch of Leavers moved there in advance, hoping to tip it.'

'Eight hundred to nineteen thousand?' Sonia asked. 'Quite the movement.'

'Never said it was successful.'

As the rest of the results were counted, an interview with one of the leaders of the Leave movement was shown, telling us how successful their campaign had been and comparing the referendum to a war.

'A bit worrying, really,' Sonia commented. 'Rise of the far-right, already using military language.'

'What are you thinking? British Nazis?'

She shrugged. 'History's a wheel. The same things happen over and over again; by this point, it's easy to see how and why.'

'Then why does it keep happening?'

'Because people don't pay attention. Oh!' Her exclamation was as a result of Newcastle upon Tyne appearing onscreen, and we sent up a vague cheer as we saw the counting taking place. 'Surprised Julian's not there rallying the troops, doing the Remain dance.'

'If Newcastle vote Leave, he'll probably try and set us up as an independent country or make us an Irish county.' I laughed, remembering back to earlier that day. 'He was talking about taking an MP hostage this afternoon.'

'And people say local councils never accomplish anything.'

'Obviously don't have enough guns.'

Sonia leaned back on the sofa. 'Jesus, how have we only counted one constituency? How long is this going to take?'

‘All night,’ I said. ‘We’ve got enough coffee, at least; just say when you want another pot on.’

‘I’m already regretting this,’ she grumbled. ‘I don’t know how I ended up buying your “moment in history” bollocks.’

‘Bodes well for my future career as a politician, I guess. Oh, look: Newcastle’s up.’ We’d been taken back to the footage from a sports hall in Newcastle upon Tyne, only a couple of miles away from where we were sitting. The results came in, with Remain barely edging out over leave by less than two thousand votes.

‘Close,’ I said.

‘Extremely,’ Sonia agreed. ‘Still, a victory for sanity, if a narrow one.’

Orkney followed quickly afterwards, increasing Remain’s lead. It was a positive start, although not as positive as the news had led us to expect.

Leave overtook shortly afterwards, maintaining a narrow lead for some time. South Tyneside resoundingly voted Leave, as did Sunderland. ‘Well, we’ll always have that,’ Sonia said. ‘Mackems aren’t known as great thinkers; I’m surprised they didn’t mention that as part of the report.’

‘Better at Newcastle at football, though,’ I pointed out.

‘You shut your Southern mouth.’

We continued for several hours in much the same fashion. The coffee did its job in keeping me awake, although soon I was shaking almost as much as Julian had been that day and, halfway through the second pot, with Leave leading by over seventy-eight thousand, I abandoned the enterprise. Sonia managed to polish it off, but then claimed that any more was going to make her throw up.

‘We need to go back to booze,’ she said. ‘We can go back down for a while, then put some strong coffee on at around five and come up smiling.’

That didn’t seem quite right, but anything would be better than another mouthful of coffee. ‘What do you want?’

‘What have we got that’s European?’ she asked. ‘I feel like this Leave lead is all on account of the Basil Fawltys I ordered.’

I opened a bottle of Rioja, and also brought in a jug of water. We’d be pissing like racehorses all day, but I’d take that over making the hangover any worse.

Within half an hour, Remain suddenly stormed ahead. ‘It’s the alcohol,’ Sonia said. ‘It’s got to be.’

‘I think it was Glasgow,’ I said.

‘In which case I reckon you can still count alcohol.’ She took a large sip. ‘Thank God for the Scottish.’

‘Still almost seven-eighths to go, though.’

‘Then you’d better keep drinking.’

The result shifted again soon afterwards, with Leave taking the lead by only a few thousand, quickly jumping up to over thirty thousand within two minutes.

From then on, the lead widened and contracted, but remained firmly in the hands of the Leave campaign. We continued to watch, becoming increasingly quieter, with far less jokes and far less laughter.

By four o’clock, Leave had almost half a million more votes and the realisation had set in. We had been gazing at the television in silence for almost twenty minutes, too tense to speak. The gap widened further, hammering home what had already seemed to be obvious. At some point, I felt Sonia’s hand place itself in mine, gripping it tight. Neither of us could look away from the screen.

A few minutes later, Sonia stood. ‘Fuck this,’ she said. ‘I need to get my head down for a couple of hours. Mind if I crash?’

I stood with her. ‘Use my room. I’ll wake you up for breakfast.’

She nodded, picking up her bag and walking slowly out of the lounge. I sank back into the sofa. I’d made another pot of coffee a while earlier, and I took a long drink. It was lukewarm, but I wasn’t drinking it for pleasure; the movement was almost automatic.

I sat and watched the final votes come in, none of them overturning a result which just hours ago had seemed so unlikely. I felt as though I’d just been punched in the stomach, and there was a hollow, empty feeling inside me. I knew that part of it was in reaction to Sonia: the look of defeat on her face as she’d passed me, so far removed from her usual liveliness even on the worst kind of day.

Well, I thought, that was it. The knowledge had a strangely disconnected feel to it, as though it hadn’t happened yet: as though this was still one of two potential outcomes. But even when that had been the case, a victory for Remain – for *common sense* – had seemed to be the only possible result.

Maybe I was the one feeling disconnected. After all, a good portion of the country had, it turned, felt very differently about this issue than I had. And now they had decided that things were going to change. I tried not to think of it as them having more of a say than me, but the temptation was certainly there.



We were going to leave the EU. I didn't even know how that was supposed to work or how long it would take; I'd been perfectly satisfied to think of a Leave vote as the harbinger of our economic apocalypse and the rise of the far right, and the forms which would have to be signed and the meetings that whichever diplomats would need to attend hadn't seemed like important details.

It had all been impossible anyway.

I was too tired for thoughts like these. If this had happened sometime in the middle of the day I could have stormed out dramatically and got drunk; it would have been the perfect reaction and would have made about as much sense as anything else that had happened tonight. Instead I'd got drunk and mostly sobered up all before the news had even come out. After that, there wasn't much left to cover in terms of an emotional reaction. I could try for a scream of frustration, but Sonia might be sleeping. I could punch the wall, but it wasn't my wall; the only thing I'd own in that interaction would be my fist and I had a feeling that it wouldn't end up being the winner.

And whilst I might get to anger eventually, I was too tired and too depressed. I could barely get up off the sofa, let alone try and give a brick wall a piece of my mind. If one of the riotously celebrating Leave supporters on my television screen was here now, I doubted I'd be able to muster up a withering comment. They'd probably just call me a sore loser if I did.

And I was sore. It seemed impossible to me that people could have had access to the same information that I'd had, had heard the same things I'd heard and come to such an opposite conclusion. But they had, and I knew that whatever I could try to say against it would be dismissed as sour grapes or fearmongering: there wouldn't be any attempt to try and understand.

Why should they? They'd won.

There had to be some sense to all of this: some logic or rationale. I believed that, but I was damned if I could see it. Maybe I wasn't trying hard enough, or I wasn't even up to trying. I probably wasn't in the mood to be reasonable about things, which might have had something to do with the lack of sleep, the political upheaval or the amount of alcohol I'd consumed.

I sighed, and it felt like the first time I'd let my breath out since the result had been announced.

To hell with this. Whatever the country needed right now, they were hardly going to be lining up outside my flat in the hopes of getting it. I could afford to drop out of

the situation for a few hours, just to say that I'd had some sleep tonight. My bed was barely twenty steps and two doors away from me, but if I really motivated myself I could probably get to it.

Thinking of the bed reminded me that Sonia was currently occupying it, and I suddenly felt guilty. I'd been so absorbed with what was happening all over the country, I'd forgotten about her. She didn't even know what had happened yet. How would she feel once she'd been told? Should I wake her up and tell her, or should I let her enjoy living in a world where we weren't about to exit the European Union?

I forced myself upright, walking slowly towards my bedroom with a glass of water. My exhaustion, waiting for the best possible moment to announce itself, crashed into me as I started to move. Somehow, I reached the door, remembering just in time to give it a gentle knock. Hearing nothing, I followed it up with a louder one. There was still no response, and I went inside.

Sonia was lying in bed, on her side. I put the water down on the bedside table, trying to do so as quietly as possible, but she still turned over to look at me.

'Hey.' Her voice was dull and flat. The life had gone from it, and I hoped that it was due to her own tiredness.

'Hey,' I said, not bothering to try a smile. 'It's over. It stayed...it's still Leave. We're leaving.'

'Jesus.' She shut her eyes for a moment, as if trying to come to terms with what I was telling her. 'I mean...I just...I never *thought*, you know.'

'I know,' I said, sitting down. I really did. 'I can't even get my head around it.' I didn't go into any more detail. She looked as though she was having a rough enough time of it already without the Political and Social Enlightenment of Thomas Gabriel Barrett being thrust upon her.

She shifted, pushing the pillows against the headboard and sitting up. She wasn't wearing a t-shirt this time: just a black lace bra. Under other circumstances it would have been an extremely attractive sight, but her mood cast a pall over its appeal.

'And are you remaining?' she asked, managing a slight laugh as she said it. 'I wouldn't mind some company.'

I slipped off my trousers, shirt and socks, and slid into the bed beside her. She turned over, moving towards me, and knowing what she wanted I wrapped my arms around her. Even after spending two hours in the bed, she felt cold.

We stayed there for a long time: I've no idea how long. Every time I thought that Sonia had fallen back to sleep, she shifted in a way which let me know she was awake. Her hair was in my face, but I didn't bother to move it.

After however long it might have been, she sighed. I could feel the breath leaving her body. 'It's all so fucked up,' she said. 'Everything. It's all going to change now.' She shuddered suddenly. 'Christ, I just...I can't. It's all...it's *too much*. Too big to focus on.'

'It'll be alright,' I said, quietly. It was a useless thing to say, and I had the strong suspicion that I was dead wrong. I wondered whether anyone, right now, knew exactly what was going to happen. At the thought, an image of Uncle Andrew appeared in my mind. I pushed it away, not comfortable imagining close family members in my current position. 'We're going to be okay,' I added.

'No,' she said, in that same, flat tone of voice. 'I'm pretty sure it's not going to be alright. You heard what the experts said. You heard Julian: "completely fucked". And now it's happened.'

I couldn't think of anything to say to that except to repeat that everything would be fine, so I just held on.

'Jesus,' she said, with a shaky laugh. 'Julian. We'll need to put him on suicide watch. You're actually going to have to fuck him now to take his mind off it.'

Despite the situation, despite everything, I let out a laugh myself. 'Nice to know your sense of humour survived.'

'He'll be sitting there, right now, trying to work out if he can attach rockets to the bottom of Newcastle and blast it off from the UK: literal satellite state.'

The laughter was on both of us now, and we didn't stand a chance of stopping. Somewhere during it, Sonia turned around and we were facing each other, the mirth shaking both of us.

And suddenly, the laughter had ended and the two of us, faces inches apart, were looking at each other.

Sonia's face had gone serious, her expression as she examined me almost contemplative. Then I saw her head move forward. Our lips were touching before my eyes managed to close, and then they were pressed fully against each other. Every coherent thought which had been in my head a moment before was suddenly thrust out of it, and all I was aware of was her mouth on mine and her body, barely clothed, pushed against me.

After far too short a time, we broke the contact, breathing hard as though we were swimmers coming up for air. We exchanged another look, both of us reaching a silent agreement through it, and then we were kissing again, this time with a purpose, the motions more definite and almost frantic.

Her hands ran down my body as mine were running over hers. The kisses were harder to the point of forceful, and our hands were tugging at what little we were wearing without moving apart for a single moment. It was as though every idle thought and moment of wondering since we'd met had built up to the point where this was the only way forward. Sonia's hand found my neck and she was pulling me even closer to her, turning us both over until her full weight was on top of me.

Somehow, in the frenzy of kissing and hands moving over each other, as our clothing was tugged and pulled from each other, we managed another second in which, sucking in shivering breaths, we looked at each other.

Sonia nodded first, and I answered with one of my own.

Her hand slid down my stomach as she bent forward, locking us together in another kiss.

\* \* \*

I don't know how long it took for me to open my eyes when we were done. It might have been hours. Sonia had shifted off me and was lying down beside me. I slid my arm around her and she moved closer, laying her head on my shoulder with an arm thrown over my chest.

That made two surprising events which had happened this morning. At least my thoughts about this one were a lot clearer. It seemed like there was less politics to it.

We lay there in silence. I had no idea what time it was. Between this and Brexit, I didn't have any attention to spare for anything else. I doubted Julian would care if I showed up today; he might not even notice, and that was if he made it in himself.

Sonia adjusted her position slightly, turning her head so that she could see my face. 'What's going to happen now?' she asked. Her voice was louder than it had been, and there was some of her old life back in it now.

I tried to shrug, but one side of me was pinned under her. 'I don't know,' I said. 'I don't think anyone has any idea. All I know is that nobody on the Remain side thinks that it'll be good, and everyone on the Leave side thinks it'll be better. Past that...I don't know what details they are. There's not really a map for this.'

She was quiet for a minute, then said, 'I meant what happens about us, you idiot.'

‘Oh.’ I’d forgotten how good I was at this.

‘I mean...what do you want?’ Sonia asked. ‘Are we calling this a one-time sort of fling? Chalk it up to a big emotional mistake and go back to normal?’

‘I don’t want to just forget about this,’ I said, slowly. ‘I like you: I *really* like you. And...I know that you’ve not had an easy time of relationships in the past, and I know that I’ve not had any...at all. But if you wanted to do this, then I’d want it too.’

‘This?’ she asked, so quiet that it could be a whisper.

‘Us,’ I replied. ‘You and me. Together.’ I hesitated. ‘Do...do you?’

There was a long pause. I could barely hear her breathing, even with her lying on top of me. Then I felt her head move. It wasn’t until I looked at her that I realised that she was nodding. ‘I want this,’ she said, her voice still soft. ‘I...I didn’t know if it was going to happen, when we started hanging out. I wanted it to; gave you enough hints, or I thought I had.’ Her arm slipped under me, holding on more tightly, and I felt her squeeze me slightly. ‘Let’s try it.’

I managed a smile, and she did as well. I moved towards her, about to give her a kiss, when I heard my phone vibrate on the bedside cabinet where I’d left it the night before. I hesitated, and Sonia saw and smiled again. ‘Get it,’ she said. ‘I think everyone’s going to be checking their phones a lot today.’

I reached over to the cabinet, scrabbling slightly as I picked up the phone. I flipped open the case and read the alert: it was a text from Julian.

*May as well stay home today; I don’t think we’re going to get much done. J.*

Sonia craned her head, reading it as well. ‘A semi-colon in a text message,’ she said. ‘Now there’s someone who went to a fancy school.’

‘I wonder if he’s alright,’ I said. I went to put the phone down, but instead opened up the News app and started scrolling through.

‘My guess is no,’ Sonia said, settling her head back on my chest. ‘He’s got to take something like this pretty hard. It wrecks everything he was working towards, apparently.’

‘His message seemed pretty calm.’

‘Text always does. You can’t judge the tone. Are you replying?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I’m just seeing what people are saying about all this.’ I stopped scrolling. ‘Holy shit.’

Sonia tilted her head, this time to kiss my chest gently. ‘What?’ she asked. ‘Does someone have a story on the two of us? Universal human-interest angle, plus a sexual component?’

‘Prime Minister’s resigned.’

That got her attention. ‘Fuck,’ she said, lifting herself up a little. ‘That didn’t take long.’

‘It did not.’

‘God, imagine having to resign this early in the morning after a night like that. I got laid, and I feel pretty fucking rough.’ She glanced at me. She snorted suddenly. ‘Oh God. “What were you doing when David Cameron resigned”.’ Her giggles shook me, and soon I was laughing too. ‘So,’ she asked, recovering herself slightly, ‘what happens now? General election?’

‘Maybe,’ I said, reading through the story. ‘Doesn’t say. They don’t have to, though. They could just elect a new leader. Don’t need to have a general election until 2020.’

‘Not who the country voted for, though.’

‘I reckon a few million of them technically just did.’

She sighed. ‘Going to be difficult getting a new job with “I fucked Britain and the EU” written on your CV.’

I smiled. ‘There’s probably a more tactful way of putting it.’

‘Jesus, this whole thing’s gone to shit,’ she said. ‘And the captain’s just jumped overboard, and it’s been about two hours. What are the next seven days going to be like?’

‘Are you talking about the country this time, or us again?’

‘The country, dumbass. Although at least you considered us this time.’

‘I’m new to this whole “boyfriend” thing,’ I said. ‘Plus, I might still be in shock. This was some big news.’

‘Then put the phone down, genius. Stop making it worse.’ Her hand reached back onto my chest. ‘Don’t think about it.’

‘I can’t help it. It’s like picking at a scab. You can’t stop.’

Sonia snorted. ‘Okay, that’s something people with no willpower say. You can absolutely not pick at a scab; that’s actually how scabs heal fastest.’

‘What, like you don’t pick at scabs?’

‘Of course not. Because I’m not five years old.’ Her hand moved down my chest and continued lower. ‘I *could* always distract you, if you wanted.’

I smiled. ‘I don’t think I could. Not just yet.’ She looked up at me with a grin, full of the same feisty spirit which had had such an effect on me when we’d first met. ‘I...sorry you didn’t get to...you know.’

Sonia laughed, kissing my chest again. ‘Oh my God, you’re actually blushing. Okay, I have to ask: this wasn’t your –’

I let out a laugh too, laying the phone aside. ‘No, *thank-you*. It wasn’t. It was just...well, I wasn’t...’

‘I was asking because of the blushing, actually. Although next time it would be nice if, you know...’ Her fingers walked back up my chest, letting the sentence hang there.

‘I’ll do my best,’ I said, trying not to feel stung by the turn that the conversation had taken. As if she could sense it, she put her arm back around me.

‘There’ll be plenty of other chances,’ she said. ‘On days when the whole country hasn’t been ripped in two.’ She shifted herself upwards, moving her head onto my shoulder. ‘I suppose it beats having a headache, as excuses go.’

‘About half the country’s probably got a headache now.’ I groaned, feeling queasy with the tiredness, the recent turn of events, and the faint but unmistakeable beginnings of a hangover. ‘What time do you have to be at work?’

‘I’m not going to go,’ she said. ‘I’ve never had a sick day in my life, so I’m going to cash one in today. I’ll call in a bit.’

‘Any plans past that?’

‘Oh, are you up to it again now?’ she asked, smiling innocently. I laughed, and she shook her head. ‘Right now, I’m afraid I’m not thinking too far past breakfast. Which I’m hoping is a possibility in the near future?’

‘Extremely possible,’ I said. ‘Just give me a couple of minutes, and I’ll make a start on it.’

Twenty minutes later, I slid a tray of sizzling bacon out of the grill, making up some sandwiches. Against my better judgement, I’d had Sonia make up another pot of coffee. We needed the energy.

‘No news,’ she said, pushing the plunger down on the cafetière. ‘Let’s try and have a nice breakfast, without having to think about politics or the future, or whatever.’

‘Because hiding from it worked out so well the last time we tried it?’

She stuck her tongue out at me. ‘Well, we didn’t know what was going to happen. We wanted to find out.’

‘We don’t know what’s going to happen now.’

‘Do you really want to spend our first day as a couple arguing?’

I smiled, taking her hand and pulling her closer. She leaned against me, letting me hold her for a moment. ‘No,’ I said. ‘You make a good point: no news during breakfast.’

She giggled. ‘Post-Brexit breakfast.’

‘Post-Brexit bacon sandwiches.’ I glanced at the packet. ‘Danish bacon, too. We’ll have to say goodbye to that.’

‘Should have been the campaign slogan: no more bacon sandwiches if we leave. Would have been a landslide.’

I handed her two stotties full of a bacon on a plate. ‘Except for the Muslims and Jews.’ I followed her through to the lounge.

‘Except for the *serious* Muslims and Jews,’ she pointed out. ‘And the young ones who still live with their parents. Bacon sandwiches are a British tradition.’ She dropped down onto the sofa. ‘And extremely good for hangovers.’

‘Which serious Muslims really shouldn’t have,’ I said, sitting down beside her. ‘Or Hindus either, probably?’

‘Yeah, you’d think that,’ she said. ‘But growing up in an Asian family, you get pretty damn good at lying or you don’t have any fun.’

‘Seems like they did alright, considering,’ I said, around a mouthful of my own booty. Etiquette was one thing, but right now I needed bacon. ‘You’ve got a job in the city council, looking at a pupillage. They must be happy with that.’

Sonia shook her head. ‘You’ve a lot to learn about Asian parents, trust me.’ She grinned. ‘Yeah, that’s going to be fun for you, if we get to that stage.’

‘Nice to know you’re optimistic about us, dear.’

‘We’ll see how keen you are after you meet my Mum. Might turn you off: grim vision of the future and everything.’

‘She can’t be that bad. You said there wasn’t any baggage in that department.’

‘Nothing massively out of the ordinary,’ she said. ‘Just extremely high expectations, and our family is an organisation that does not tolerate failure.’

‘I see. So, that’s one side of things. How about your Dad?’



She waved a hand. 'He's an old sweetheart. Sells cars: owns a company. Definitely a lot more chill than Mum, but always supportive. Let me do my own thing as long as I didn't start any fires.'

'Because he knew your Mum would keep you in line.'

Sonia nodded. 'She tried, anyway.' She took another bite out of her sandwich. 'This is really good, by the way.'

'Pretty hard to screw up a bacon sandwich.'

We kept eating for a while, until most of our breakfast was finished. I glanced at my laptop, and Sonia caught me. 'Still curious?' she asked.

'Still anxious. Never been good at the unknown.'

'Go ahead,' Sonia sighed, and kissed me on the cheek before standing. 'I need a shower; you can keep me updated on all the horrible shit that's happened in the time it's taken to have breakfast.' She looked around. 'Any towels I can borrow?'

'You can use the ones in the bathroom; I'll get mine out of the dryer.'

She left the room, heading through the flat to the bathroom. I wondered briefly about following her to try and seeing what might happen, but I knew that I wasn't going to be able to hold myself back from the situation any more.

I flipped open the laptop, which had been on and running since the night before, started up the internet and threw myself head-first into the madness.

Half an hour later, Sonia stepped out of the bathroom, wrapped in one towel and drying her hair with another. 'Bathroom's free,' she said, walking over to me. 'How's the rest of the country?'

'Opinions are sort of divided,' I said. 'The biggest one seems to be that this is the start of the apocalypse.'

'Oh, well. At least I don't have to worry about the future. What are the other opinions?'

I yawned. 'Well, there's some people who reckon that we just got our national sovereignty back. And a few who think that us no longer being the fifth-largest economy was going to happen with or without Brexit. And there's some who think that everyone not a hundred percent British who's currently here is going to have to ship out, and some who think that this is going to lead to a rise of Nazism in England and, eventually, World War Three.'

‘Didn’t think I took that long a shower,’ Sonia commented dryly. ‘This is turning into one hell of a morning. Why don’t you get ready, if you can rip yourself away from the news for a few minutes, and we can see what happens next.’

A hot shower did feel good, dulling what little of my hangover was left. With my body working on automatic, my mind began to dwell on all that had happened over the last twenty-four hours.

Everything that Julian was working towards was, probably, no longer a realistic future. This was worrying me more and more as time passed. His text had seemed fairly lucid but, as Sonia had said, you could never really tell with the written word. I remembered how he’d been after losing his position in the Party and, even more recently, after it seemed as though Gateshead might manage to punch a hole through his dreams of devolution: he’d seemed almost in danger of folding in on himself. I couldn’t imagine he’d do any better when faced with this, and it didn’t seem likely that many of his friends in the Opposition would have much time to spare in order to pull him back upright. So, that might get left to me to handle, and I wasn’t at all sure that I’d have enough whisky.

And Sonia and I had made a large and very definite change to our relationship. Admittedly, the timing was probably all wrong. I’d tried to make a point of not getting too physical with anyone who didn’t seem to be in their right frame of mind, and whilst neither of us had been particularly drunk at that point, we definitely hadn’t been at our best politically. Who knew what was going to happen as things, hopefully, got steadier? Would it work? When the shock of Brexit had cleared, would we both still want it to?

My entire future seemed suddenly full of unknowns. Of course, the future mostly is, but these seemed like a far more *definite* sort of unknown than the usual, run-of-the-mill kind.

There was, at any rate, a lot to think about.

I finished showering, brushed my teeth and, feeling slightly more human, left the bathroom and got dressed.

When I came back into the lounge, Sonia was sitting in front of my laptop. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘if Julian wasn’t doing too well before, I think things might be about to get worse.’

‘Oh no. What’s happening now?’

She swivelled the computer to face me. ‘He’s friends with this guy, right?’

The guy in question was Jeremy Corbyn, Leader of Her Majesty's Most Loyal Opposition. Although, according to the article, apparently not for very much longer.

'The Labour Party's managed to find their scapegoat,' I observed.

'Yep. Seems like they don't think he was vocal enough in his support for Remain. So, somehow this is more his fault than the Prime Minister's. And seeing as how the PM's just announced his resignation...'

'They'll be looking to kick him out too,' I finished, glumly. More bad news, and definitely more problems stacking up for Julian. I didn't doubt that his friendship with his Party's leader had been the reason he'd been handed the reins of devolution, whatever the reason for his expulsion from the Shadow Cabinet. With Corbyn gone, how many friends would Julian have?

'There's a bunch of MPs and Shadow Ministers who are calling for him to resign,' Sonia confirmed. 'It's a pretty big list so far. Reckon we'll see him gone by the end of the week.'

I sat down next to her, looking through. I didn't know many of the names, which seemed to be a curse for anyone currently doing anything for the Opposition, but one was conspicuous by his absence. 'Well, at least that's something.'

'What is?'

'My uncle,' I said, leaning back on the sofa, eyes closed. 'His name's not on the list, at least. Jesus, Julian's going to go fucking mental when he finds out.'

'Is he?' Sonia asked. 'I mean, it's politics, right? Just the game they all play?'

I shook my head grimly. 'Not Julian. He'll take this one to heart, I think. It's how he is.'

'Well, my advice is not to be the one to tell him. Let him find out on his own; you don't need to get in the middle of any of this.' She sighed. 'I'm sorry. This has got to be really tough for you, considering.'

'Considering my gay relationship with him?'

'No, because you feel responsible for him. Don't argue: it's obvious. And it's nice. But you don't have to be his carer. He's a politician, and he's going to have to be able to deal with all the shit that comes with that. Just...let him handle it, alright? I don't want to see you try and take bullets for him.'

I looked at Sonia, who was staring frankly at me. 'Alright,' I said. 'Fine. I'll...not say anything.'

‘Good. It’s not your job. Focus on you.’ She paused for a moment. ‘And me, if you like.’

‘I’ll bear that in mind. Anything else going on right now?’

Sonia shook her head. ‘Nope. The country’s only going to collapse so much before lunch. It’s already more news than has happened for the entire rest of the year.’

It was a fair point. ‘So,’ I asked, ‘what now?’

‘Are you talking about us, or Britain?’

‘Us. Well, what we’re going to do for the rest of the day. Seeing as how you’re playing hooky from work, and Julian’s trying not to let me see his ugly side.’

‘Well,’ Sonia said, slowly, ‘I think I might take a short break from alcohol. We could always try and block out the world again: get some movies playing, order out and pretend that none of the last twenty-four hours happened apart from the part where we had sex?’

‘That,’ I said, ‘sounds like an excellent idea.’

‘Fine,’ Sonia said, briskly. She shut down the internet and closed the laptop. ‘That’s it,’ she said. ‘The evil’s not going to get to us. We can check on before we go to sleep.’

‘Fair enough. I just need to do one thing first. Pick a movie and I’ll be back in a second.’ I stood up from the sofa, walking back out of the lounge to my room. I picked up the mobile phone, and then re-read the text that Julian had sent me earlier.

*May as well stay home today; I don’t think we’re going to get much done. J.*

I had to know. No matter what Sonia said, I couldn’t just leave it. I went to the number the message had come from and pressed call.

The phone rang. And kept ringing. I stayed on, not sure at exactly what point it was okay to hang up. Some people’s phones never went to the answering machine; they could ring pretty much all day. I wondered if that was something that the phone’s owner made happen out of choice and, if so, what that said about the person.

Once it had gotten to thirty rings, I realised that nobody was going to pick up, so I ended the embryonic call. After a second, I turned the phone off. If Julian wasn’t in a talking frame of mind, I didn’t have to be either, and as my family had lived in the same county going back at least seven generations, I doubted that I was about to get a call from my mother telling us that we were about to lose our citizenship.

I left the phone on the bedside cabinet, walked back into the lounge and settled back on the sofa, reaching for the television remote.

‘So,’ I said, putting my arm around Sonia’s shoulders, ‘what are we paying attention to instead of real life?’

## CHAPTER TEN

We spent the rest of the day watching movies and eating the two large pepperoni pizzas. As distractions went, *Casablanca*, *Citizen Kane* and *Mean Girls* were just about up to the task. By the afternoon, it was almost possible to forget that this wasn't a normal day.

'Just think,' Sonia said, 'if this had all happened a few years later, you might be in Westminster right now, having to scramble around like mad and try and work out what the hell's going on.'

'I think the one thing I'd hate more than experiencing all this would be having to help make it happen,' I replied, putting my arm around Sonia. 'I'd much rather be here.'

'Coward.' She sounded amused as she leaned against me. 'Besides, you could go rogue. Try and destroy Brexit before it ever happens: commit daring political espionage.'

'That would certainly be one possibility.'

'And speaking of espionage,' she went on, 'did you manage to get through to Julian earlier?'

'Ah. You knew.'

'Don't worry. You're just incredibly predictable and easy to read.' She rested her head on my shoulder. 'Give him a little time to adjust to the reality of things: he'll probably bounce back. Let's get some sleep.'

Once in bed, we traded several kisses, hands moving gently over each other, but we were too tired to take it any further. We tried falling asleep in each other's arms, but Sonia shifted around a lot in bed and we soon gave up, content to simply feel the other one next to us.

Sonia was soon snoring softly beside me but, despite my tiredness, I couldn't quite get to sleep. The day's events stretched out in front of me, coupled with the unknown of the future. It seemed like everything had managed to change in such a short space of time, and I had no idea what was going to happen next.

It might, I thought, through the fog of my own exhaustion, be an idea to talk to Uncle Andrew. If nothing else, he'd always seemed like a man who knew what was going on.

Sonia made a faint noise, rolling onto her front, pinning my arm as she did so. I tried to extricate it for a moment but soon gave up, not wanting to wake her up after the day she'd had.

It had been an interesting one.

When I woke up, Sonia was still asleep. I checked my phone: it was nine o'clock, and I had no messages from Julian. I glanced at Sonia, who'd let go of my arm at some point during the night, and made a decision.

I slid out of bed, pulling on a robe and leaving the room, already scrolling through my contacts. I found the one I was looking for and made the call.

Two rings later, there was a click, and I heard my uncle's voice. *'Tom? Is everything alright?'*

I weighed up possible interpretations and decided that he was probably referring to the personal. 'I'm okay,' I said. 'Still a bit shocked, but I'm alright. Um...' I hesitated. 'Have...have you heard from Julian at all? It's just I've been trying to get in touch with him, and he's not replying.'

*'Julian?'* My uncle paused. *'I...no, Tom, I haven't. Things have been somewhat chaotic at the moment. I haven't really had a chance.'*

I nodded. Uncle Andrew wasn't exactly the type to make social calls, even when the UK wasn't in the process of claiming its independence. 'Okay. Well, I was just checking. He told me yesterday that I shouldn't bother coming in; I just don't know if...' I tailed off. If what, actually? If he'd done 'something silly'? That was what Mum had always insisted on calling it, even when our second cousin had taken an overdose: she'd 'done something silly' which had been, at the same time, something extremely serious. 'If he's alright,' I finished, eventually.

There was another pause. I could hear Uncle Andrew's breaths through the line. *'I see,'* he said, finally. *'Well, I can call him now, if you think that would help.'*

I nodded instinctively, feeling strangely relieved. 'Thanks, Uncle Andrew. If it's not too much trouble.'

*'Not at all. Would you like me to call you back when I get hold of him, or do you want me to tell him to get in touch with you?'*

I struggled with that for a moment, but finally settled for saying, 'If you could ring back, that would be great. Thanks again.'

*‘Quite all right, Tom. I’ll ring him right now and see what’s what.’* The line went dead, and I let out a breath. What would happen if Uncle Andrew couldn’t get hold of him? Should I go to his house? What would I come across there if I did?

I pushed the thoughts away, annoyed with myself. This was all completely hypothetical: for all I knew, Julian was completely fine, probably minus a hell of a hangover. All I had to do was wait for a call.

I slipped back into my room to find Sonia awake, leaning on her elbow and looking at me. ‘I thought for a second you’d done a runner,’ she said. ‘Then I remembered that this was your flat, so it seemed fairly unlikely. What’s up?’ Her eyes moved to the phone in my hand. ‘Ah. Did you get hold of him?’

‘I wasn’t calling him,’ I said. ‘I was talking to my uncle: the MP. I was asking whether he’d heard from him.’

‘I see.’ Sonia’s tone seemed a little guarded. I threw off the robe, getting back into bed.

‘Sorry, it’s just really starting to worry me,’ I said. ‘He can get into...*slumps*, I guess, and this is pretty major.’

‘You don’t think he’s killed himself, do you?’ Now her voice was sceptical, although I could hear an undercurrent of concern running through it.

I thought about that for a second, but then shook my head. ‘I don’t think so. But I don’t think he’ll be in good shape. And now he’s got a weekend to sit and think about it: can’t be good for him.’

‘No,’ Sonia said. ‘He’s got a weekend to come to terms with everything. And he needs to, if he’s going to keep doing this; he knows that. I bet he’ll be fine come Monday.’

‘I hope –’ I was cut off as my phone vibrated, then started to ring. I looked at it, then back at Sonia. She gestured at it impatiently, and I took the call.

‘Hello?’

‘*Tom?*’

‘Uncle Andrew?’

*‘I managed to catch him,’* my uncle said. *‘He’s in a bit of a dark mood, but he’s always been a little dramatic when it comes to things like this. I should give him a day or two to get back on track; that’s probably the best way for him to cope. Just try to enjoy your weekend; he’ll be back with you on Monday.’*

‘Right,’ I said, ‘shall do. Thanks, Uncle Andrew.’



*‘He also mentioned to me that you’ve been spending rather a lot of time in the company of a young lady.’*

Sonia, who could most definitely hear everything my uncle was saying, clapped a hand over her mouth to smother a laugh. I waved a hand at her, definitely eager to avoid any kind of contact between her and Uncle Andrew both at this dangerous political time and whilst the two of us (and, for all I knew, my uncle as well) were naked.

‘Goodbye, Uncle Andrew.’

*‘I take it that this is a bit of news you’d like me not to convey to your mother?’*

Uncle Andrew said, sounding amused in a most un-Uncle Andrew like manner.

‘Thank you, Uncle Andrew.’

*‘Have a pleasant weekend, Tom.’* The call ended.

Sonia threw herself back down on the pillows, shaking with giggles. I had to smile, lying down beside her. ‘Something funny?’

‘It was like he was vetting you for possible scandals,’ she said, still laughing. ‘Is seeing a young woman out of wedlock so damaging to your future parliamentary career?’

‘Not as damaging as my mother finding out about it,’ I said, putting my arms around her. ‘She’ll have you on the phone for about six hours, and that’s if she doesn’t demand that we both head down there for a formal meeting.’

‘Dear God, what have I gotten myself into?’ She grinned, pulling me on top of her. I could feel her bare skin beneath me, and I kissed her full on the mouth.

‘Technically, it’s more a question of who got themselves into you –’ I started, but I was cut off by a fresh explosion of laughter and, for a while, we managed to forget about the world outside the bedroom yet again.

Once we’d gotten up and dressed (something which inexplicably took far more time than usual, despite the two of us sharing a shower), we agreed that it might be time to finally face the world. This was partly because there was only so long you could hide from such a thing, also because Sonia needed to check in at her flat and at least fetch a new pair of clothes, and also because there was nothing in my house that could possibly be consumed for breakfast.

We stepped out of the apartment with silent trepidation, ready for screaming mobs, roaring fires and the sound of jackboots marching in synchronised goosetstep. There

was nothing. The world seemed much the same as it had been before. The sun was even shining which, it seemed to me, it had no right to be doing.

We reached the bus stop without anything untoward taking place. Several people were standing at the stop with us, and none of them attempted to beat us into submission or demand that we show them our papers. There was, perhaps, a sense that none of this was really happening and that we were all waiting to wake up, but that may well have just been me.

The bus came, and there weren't any swastikas painted on it. Even if there had been, that could have just been put down to your garden-variety British graffiti.

Sonia and I sat together on the bus, holding hands. I'd never done much of that before meeting her, but I was enjoying the new experience. I found myself glancing at her face when she was looking out of the window, examining it for details I might have missed, trying to fix them in my memory.

I found myself smiling again, despite everything. There were still good things happening even if, to the best of my knowledge, they were only happening to me.

Sonia caught me smiling and looked at me. 'What's got you in such a good mood?'

'You,' I said, giving her hand a squeeze. 'I think you're probably the only thing that's keeping me from getting depressed.'

She rolled her eyes. 'Well, thanks for that epic responsibility, drama queen. What, am I supposed to just have sex with you whenever you're in a slump?'

I grinned. 'Well, I wouldn't only want you when I was in a bad mood.'

That earned me a hard nudge to the ribs, but we were both laughing by then. 'Alright, for the emotional blackmail shit you just tried to pull, you're buying breakfast and I get to choose where.'

'Well, you do know the city better.' A notion occurred to me, and I pulled out my phone.

Sonia nudged me again. 'If you call him again, I swear, I'll break up with you.'

'Alright, *that's* emotional blackmail,' I said. 'And no, I was just wondering...' I brought up the BBC webpage, zooming in on a coloured map of Great Britain. 'Yep,' I continued, slipping it away. 'Newcastle was the one place to vote Remain in the North East. Even Gateshead wanted out.'

'Huh.' Sonia thought about that. 'Probably Julian doctoring as many ballots as he could. Wonder if they'll want to look at our passports on the way in.'

I laughed. 'He can just devolve Newcastle: blow up the bridges and set up a wall around the city, like West Berlin.'

'Julian Ashworth, ruling a Europhile state in a Eurosceptic region,' Sonia mused. 'He'll have us sneaking over the wall every week, trying to snatch some supplies and make Brexit supporters defect.'

'You were talking about me committing espionage.'

'You couldn't sneak out of your own bedroom to call your uncle; you'd be shot before you got three steps. No, we'll need to close the borders and create a workers' paradise inside the city. Seize the means of production and base our economy on Newcastle Brown Ale and Gregg's: that's what I call a Northern Powerhouse.'

'Please,' I said, 'don't turn Julian into a communist. I can just about handle his energy as it is now; the last thing I need is him calling me "comrade".'

'He could call me "fascist" if it meant my damn bins got collected.'

We reached the centre of town, bickering affectionately all the way. When we disembarked at Eldon Square (noticeably free from revolutionaries, radicals and racists), we made our way through the streets in search of a decent breakfast.

'Weird, isn't it?' I commented, after a while. 'Everything's changed, except nothing has to look at it.'

'What were you expecting?' Sonia asked. 'You think they'd be building barricades, singing the song of angry men? People have other concerns. They need to work, buy food, take care of their kids or parents. Not everyone's life revolves around politics.'

'Politics affects everyone's life, though. Even if they don't want it to.'

'True,' she admitted. 'But maybe people don't want to think about it. I mean...are you feeling all that cheerful right now?'

'No.'

'Exactly. And we spent all of yesterday ignoring everything that was going on, and I hope you enjoyed yourself a bit doing that.'

'I did,' I said. 'Of course I did.'

'So why wonder why other people do it?' she asked, with a shrug. 'Ever tried just not watching the news for a week? Makes you feel way more positive.'

'Ignorance is bliss?'

She nodded. 'It's a saying for a reason. Mostly because it's right. Now, come on: breakfast. I'm starving.'

I let her drag me down Grey Street, pulling me into a large, darkly-furnished café. ‘I’ll take a double espresso, plus a bacon and sausage stottie and some fizzy water,’ she said. ‘You get that; I’ll get us a table.’

After a short time in the queue I ordered some breakfast and a few espressos, and then we sat back, ready to begin another morning of recovery. It was amazingly unfair, I thought, that it was possible to not drink all day and yet still feel like you had a hangover. Maybe forty-eight percent of Britain felt like this: a sort of shared, national after-effect of a wild night full of mistakes.

Still, a cooked breakfast inside a giant floury bap certainly had some incredible restorative qualities. I savoured every bite, wondering what the national, social and political metaphors for bacon and sausage stotties might be. I couldn’t think of anything, but I’d never had much of an imagination.

Halfway through her own sandwich, Sonia lay back against the bench with a groan, leaning on me. ‘God, I’m eating way too much in this relationship. You’re going to have to roll me to work if we keep this off.’

‘We’re entitled to a few days of poor choices, I figure,’ I said. ‘In light of some far worse ones.’

She reached for her second double espresso, taking a sip. ‘Did you just imply that us getting together was a mistake?’

‘Absolutely not.’

‘Even if I became basically spherical over the next few weeks?’

I hesitated, groping for a diplomatic answer, and she laughed. ‘Don’t worry: no plans of that. But nice response, Tom, really.’

‘Would you believe that I’m still in shock?’

‘Not for a second.’ She reached for what was left of her breakfast sandwich and then changed her mind, leaning back again. ‘What do you want to do for the rest of the day?’

‘I have some ideas.’

She grinned. ‘I’m sure you do. Thing is, I’m going to need a couple of hours before we do anything like that, after this breakfast.’ She thought for a moment. ‘We could bum around town? Go for a walk? Keep an eye out for any sign of a communist utopia?’

I drank the rest of my water. ‘In Northumberland Street?’

‘Stranger things have happened.’ She thought for a second, then added, ‘Probably.’

Before we could do anything else, I had to spend thirty minutes on Sonia's sofa as she changed into some new clothes, wondering how long 'five more minutes' could conceivably be stretched out to. When she finally emerged, we set off on the short trip back into town.

We had been walking around Northumberland Street for a while, looking at various shops at hundreds of items we'd never think of buying and trying on clothes that we'd never want to wear. I was doing my best not to think about politics, which was a difficult thing to do on a Newcastle street when you knew its history; every brutalist structure might as well have had T. Dan Smith sitting on it, enjoying the show. When we drew close to the bottom of the street, however, Sonia pointed over to Grey's Monument.

'What's that?' she asked.

'What?'

'Look, over there. There's a load of people, right next to the Monument.'

I looked over at the huge pillar, protruding from its stone platform. There were, indeed, a large crowd of people gathered around it. From what I knew, this was nothing new: it always had been a popular place to meet friends, mostly because everyone knew where it was and, if they didn't, it was damn difficult to miss. But what was happening there now didn't look anything like that.

I looked at Sonia questioningly, and she shrugged. We headed for the Monument, curious as to what was taking place. As we drew closer, we were able to see what was happening a little clearer. There was a definite separation in the crowd: one group was standing on the raised platform, their backs to the Monument, holding up a large sign between them. Another crowd was some distance away, facing the first group, shouting and gesturing violently at them.

'What the hell?' Sonia walked forward, keeping a good way to the side of both groups, until we finally realised what was happening.

The sign the crowd by the Monument held read 'MIGRANTS WELCOME'. There were other signs, with other slogans, mostly along the same lines. It was understandable, I supposed, in the wake of the referendum results. People would react; they'd know what the possibilities of a Brexit were. It certainly did a better job of getting the message across than the spokesman, whose words were being mangled by his megaphone, lost by the time they reached us.

Less understandable, though no less expected, were the sentiments on display by the second group. Their signs were blocked from my view, but you didn't need them to work out what they were there to say. I could see plenty of England flags and more than a few shaved heads. Resorting to stereotypes was a habit Julian had done his best to turn me away from, but you could be presented with too great a temptation. One of their number had their own megaphone and were using it to drown out the opposing spokesman's words; the rest were jeering and shouting, adding to the clamour surrounding the Monument.

A line of neon-jacketed police separated the two groups, clearly not wanting this to get any more heated than it already was and probably wishing that it wasn't happening at all. As I watched, one of the officers carefully pushed one of the second group back, his lips moving in what I took to be a warning; whatever was said was lost in the noise which seemed to be growing in volume all the while. A chant of 'EDL' had started up, which before long mutated into louder yells of 'boring' directed at the first group's spokesman, which in turn became a part of the uproar.

Sonia and I stood on the outskirts, looking at both groups silently. We were part of a larger crowd, who were watching in the same way as we were. And why not? It was a free show, and there was always the chance to see some arrests or maybe even a fight. And there was something about the fierceness of the emotions on display that caught your attention and held you in place. I turned to look at Sonia, wondering how she'd be taking this. She had a certain caginess if anyone brought up her status as a foreigner, as though to pre-empt any insult that might follow it. As far as she saw it, she was as British as anyone in Newcastle and, failing that, then more Irish than anything else. I'd never wondered why she held herself in this way but, considering the scene in front of us, I could imagine she'd had her reasons. It was just one other thing I'd not had to deal with.

Sonia wasn't looking at the two groups, but into the crowd. I followed her gaze, and saw that she was watching a younger girl, maybe twelve or thirteen, her hair covered with a hijab. This girl's eyes, wide and staring, were fixed on the shouting men of the second group. It must have come as quite a shock to her; she'd probably just come here to meet her friends and had suddenly stumbled into something like this.

I took Sonia's hand and she squeezed mine tightly. A few seconds later, she'd tugged on my arm. I turned to look at her, and she nodded her head back the way that we'd just come. I didn't argue; I let her lead me away from the yelling and the banners,

back up Northumberland Street, until we were standing under the awning of Fenwick. Her face was closed off, almost blank.

‘Sonia?’ She didn’t reply. ‘Sonia, are you alright?’

She laughed: a laugh without any humour in it, tense and bitter. ‘No,’ she said. ‘No, Tom, I’m not fucking alright.’ She paused, then took in a breath, straightening up and looking at me. ‘Sorry.’

I nodded. ‘Do you want to talk about it?’

‘Not here.’ She looked up and down the street. ‘There’s a Costa up there.’

I nodded. ‘Come on, then.’

We didn’t talk until we were sat down in the coffee shop. Sonia still looked pale and withdrawn, and she downed most of her double espresso within the first minute. I let mine cool for a while, watching her.

At last, she took another breath and looked at me. ‘You know what it is?’ she asked. Without waiting for a response, she went on. ‘I’d not paid any attention to that shit: the stuff they were saying about immigrants and refugees. I didn’t think it’d matter; I thought that it would go the other way and they’d go back to being ignored.’ She gave another bitter laugh. ‘It was almost like it wasn’t even about me, what they were saying.’

‘Well, you grew up in Ireland; you’ve lived in Newcastle for –’

‘I fucking *know*, Tom.’ I stopped. I’d never heard an edge like that in Sonia’s voice before. I’d never even heard her sound angry. She didn’t say anything for a while, and I didn’t try to break the silence.

When she did talk, her voice was quieter, more deliberate. ‘It doesn’t matter whether I’m an immigrant or a refugee or if I was born in the fucking RVI. Not to some people. Not to people who are out there, with the England flags and the flyers about “protecting their country”. What they’re going to see is someone who doesn’t look like they’re from around here, and they’re not going to care about checking passports or papers.’ She leaned forward, resting her head in her hands. ‘And you know what this whole Leave vote has done, Tom? It’s told them that what they think is right. It’s given them permission to say it and act on it. The people out there today’ll just be the start; it’s not going to get better after this. Politicians gave them an easy answer to all their problems: something they could hate that wasn’t the economy or fiscal cycles or legislation or trade deals. And it’s gotten out of their hands, and if people don’t try to put a stop to it, it’s going to get worse.’

She pushed herself back up, looking at me again. ‘For the first time in *fucking years*, I don’t feel like this is my home. And this *is* my fucking home, so I shouldn’t be feeling like this. And I’m angry about that; I’m angry about *them* –’ She gestured out of the window, back towards Monument, ‘– and I’m angry at myself, because I should have been a lot fucking smarter about all of this.’ She extended her arms, as if to take in all that she’d just said. ‘Do you know any way that I could feel different? Because I don’t.’

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t know what I *could* say. Telling her that there had been a huge amount of reasons why the majority had voted Leave, most of which were either highly complex or very personal, didn’t seem like it would be a winner. We were two days into a relationship, and this was far beyond anything that I’d expected to have to deal with. Without any brilliant ideas occurring to me just then, I laid a hand on the table, palm turned up. She looked at it, then put her own hand on top of it, holding on.

There was another long silence. Sonia seemingly had nothing else to say, and she knew that I didn’t have any kind of answer.

We finished our coffees and then sat looking at each other.

‘Do you want to stay in town?’ I asked. ‘Or would you rather –’

‘I think I’m going to call it a day,’ she said. ‘I want to head home, maybe call my parents; I know Mum might want someone to talk to. Dad’s never been great at that.’

‘And are we...’ I tailed off, but she looked at me, expectant. ‘Are we okay?’

Sonia managed a faint smile. It looked like a lot of effort had been put into it. ‘We’re okay, Tom. Unless you’ve got a Ku Klux Klan membership I should know about.’

I laughed. ‘Afraid not. I did go out as a ghost one Halloween.’

‘Then I think we should just about make it.’ She looked at me and shook her head. ‘It’s been a seriously emotional couple of days, you know? I just need to have a little space, process things...’ She leaned forward. ‘I like you, you idiot. You don’t have to worry about us. Just...worry about the country, okay?’

‘I thought you said not to worry about that either.’

‘If it stops you worrying about us, then I can just about handle it.’ She stood, quickly planting a kiss on my cheek. ‘I’ll call you, alright?’

‘Alright.’

I remained where I was, watching her walk out of the café. I didn’t want to risk the awkwardness of running into Sonia right after we’d just parted. I didn’t much like the idea of walking past a couple of protests that looked to be on their way to becoming a



battle royale. Julian was alive and apparently answering his phone, but I'd been advised to leave him alone for a couple of days. Sonia wanted some space. I didn't particularly want to call my parents. I really wanted a drink, but the very idea gave me a headache.

Once I got home, I found myself at a loss. Without Julian, Sonia or an alcoholic beverage, I didn't have much of an idea what to do with myself.

On my sofa, faced with the blank, dark screen of the television, I tried to understand what had happened over the last several days. Had it been politics? Would it be a major chapter in the history of Britain, or the world? I'd seen the entire debate solely in terms of right and wrong or, more honestly, sensible and idiotic, but after hearing what Sonia had had to say and seeing the two groups of protesters face off, that sentiment rang false.

People had had their opinions, and fifty-two percent of them had thought differently than I had. You couldn't call that many people racist, ignorant or delusional: it was mad to think that a group that large could all in some way be demonstrably wrong. Something which had stuck with me for my entire life had been the idea that the majority knew what they were doing and would make the most sensible choice. Until now, it had gone relatively unchallenged.

The people running the country had rolled the dice, and what they'd thought they'd known – had been certain enough of to go through with any of this – had just been proven wrong. These leaders, who spent so much time obsessing over image and trying their hardest to find out what people thought of them and how they could improve that perception, had somehow misread the situation, and badly. How had they managed to overlook the mood of the nation, enough to gamble its future direction on single a yes-or-no question?

It wasn't like I'd been any better. Apart from briefly wondering about how things would change should Leave win out – a possibility that twenty-four hours ago had seemed as unlikely as the Berlin Wall going back up – I'd never considered the result to be a possibility. Like Cameron, Osborne and May, I'd assumed that I'd known how the majority of the nation thought and had felt secure in the knowledge that the status quo would continue.

What had I ever really known about the majority?

It was, I realised, just like the Lit and Phil. At first glance, it had seemed like a grand old place, but ten minutes of searching for the book had been enough for me to

see the want and neglect. If not, I'd likely still be thinking of it as some beautiful palace of culture and knowledge, rather than an institution in desperate need of support.

I, not to mention the Remain campaign's more public figures, hadn't needed anything from the majority until we'd needed their vote, and so we'd found out the truth far too late. And as much as I'd be willing to bet that there would be articles and columns about racism, false promises and fundamental understanding of the main issues, it was going to be hard not to see it as the people who'd been wrong trying to show how, in fact, they hadn't been.

Julian had known, even if he'd not realised it himself. Perhaps he'd not linked it in his mind to the referendum itself, but he'd warned me about the dangers of overlooking people. *If there's a group of people saying that we ignored them, or that they were looked over or betrayed, then it's because we won't have done enough, or at least not done enough right.* I wondered if his words were occurring to him now, as they were to me. He'd not expected this, but if I was only reflecting on it now then I had to imagine he'd beaten me to it some time ago.

And even with all this new understanding, if I could give it such a lofty term, becoming plain to me, there was a part of me that still couldn't help but feel removed from all of it. Maybe a little of that had come from studying politics and learning under Julian; it was difficult not to regard what was happening here as anything but a case study or some far-fetched hypothetical.

More of it – far more – was because I really couldn't pin down how this was going to affect me personally. I'd not tried yet; it hadn't seemed to matter before the result. But as much as I'd joked about or disparaged the prospect of leaving, it had never been personal for me. I wasn't going to face any consequences because of this. If the economy took a hit, then I could be sure that my family and I would remain secure. If we couldn't find anyone to trade with, we'd be among some of the last to starve.

It was no wonder that I'd been surprised by the result.

I found myself staring at the blank television screen, wanting to turn it on and find some footage of crying children or shell-shocked refugees: anything I could latch onto and create some kind of empathic link with a real person whose life was going to be destroyed by this decision. Not that such a connection would mean much. Our experiences were nothing alike, and it was those experiences which would lead to our reactions.

Whatever response theirs was, I couldn't help but feel more and more that my muted surprise was a condemnation of my naivety and even my stupidity.

I dragged myself away from the idea: my thoughts were getting increasingly heavy, and I still felt like I'd not had all the sleep I needed. It was too early to climb into bed, and I'd only go on thinking the same things I was trying not to think about.

With an effort, I pushed myself up off the sofa and crossed over to the bookshelf. The T. Dan Smith book was where I left it, and I scooped it off the shelf. I wasn't going to be able to get away from politics, but at least I could choose what kind I'd torture myself with.

I flipped the book open, wondering if Smith had ever imagined anything like the referendum, and what side he'd have found himself on.

After casually turning pages for a few seconds, I came to a sentence which read, *When he stood down as Leader of Newcastle City Council to take up the position of chairman of the newly-formed NEPC in 1965, Dan genuinely believed that this would give him the power to implement his ambitious plans for the region, but in that he was sadly disappointed.*

My thoughts flashed back to Julian, but I resisted the urge to pick up my phone and try to get in touch. Instead, I flicked through several pages at random, turning to a chapter with the word 'hope' in the title. That seemed a little more optimistic, and I began to read.

After some time, I set the book aside with a yawn. Whatever else they said about Smith, and the phrase 'guilty of corruption' had a certain compelling element, you couldn't say he hadn't been motivated. It seemed like there'd not been a project happening during his years at the helm of Newcastle that he'd not thrown himself at whole-heartedly, and it wasn't like there'd been a dearth of them. Whatever could be done, he'd seemingly given his all to ensure that it would be.

In a different Newcastle, with a different referendum result, Julian Ashworth would be making plans to do much the same thing. Was the picture of Smith still hanging in Julian's study, or was that not something he felt that he could identify with anymore?

I got up, stretching my arms out and feeling my shoulders groan in complaint. It wasn't late, but I was about ready for some sleep.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

I woke to the sound of my phone, vibrating and blaring music. I stirred, turning over in bed, trying to get a handle on where I was and what was happening; I'd never been at my best first thing in the morning.

It took me a while to realise that the song wasn't my alarm clock, but rather my ringtone. My hand slapped down on the phone dragging it towards me until it was in my hand, and I managed to put it to my ear.

'Yeah?'

'*Tom?*'

'Sonia?' I pushed myself up from where I'd been lying, face-down, on my pillow. 'Hey. What's up?'

'*Late start?*'

I brought the phone in front of my face, squinting at its screen, and then put it back to my ear. 'In what world is eighty-thirty a "late start"?''

'*In the world of successful people and future lawyers. How did you end up spending the rest of your day?*'

'Nothing special. Bought some clothes, watched some movies.'

'*Of course you did.*'

'How was your mum? Did you call her?'

She paused. '*Yeah. Yeah, she wasn't all that happy. Had to talk her down a little, but that was a relief for Dad.*' Another pause. '*Well, I wanted to check in; I know I sort of peaced-out kind of quick yesterday, and I didn't want you to...I don't know, panic or anything.*'

'Did I look like I was panicking?'

'*Definitely. I could call it "worried", if it'd help.*'

I smiled. 'Maybe a little worried.' I waited for a moment. 'So...we *are* okay, right? You haven't woken up and seen the light?'

'*Afraid not. Not yet, anyhow. You're stuck with me for now.*'

'That's good to know.'

She laughed suddenly. '*Alright, no need to get soppy. I'm going to chill out here for a while, but how about we grab dinner together on Monday night? My treat; I'll let you know where and when?*'

'Sure,' I said. 'That sounds great. I'll see you then.'

‘See you.’

I lay back in bed, staring up at the white ceiling of my bedroom. It was hard to believe that, this time yesterday, Sonia had been lying next to me. Just over a day before that, we hadn’t known that just over half the population of Britain was going to take an unexpected step.

And now I was in a relationship, for the first time in my life.

That was something, I supposed.

I briefly considered calling Julian again. It didn’t take long to forget about that. If he wanted to talk, then I was sure that he’d get in touch. If he didn’t, then I imagined I’d get more of the same silence.

There was a double bill of *Goodfellas* and *Casino* on, which seemed escapist enough for my purposes. I wondered whether the Remain campaign should have taken a lesson from the mob in advance of the vote: fix the vote, break the legs of any convincing Leave mouthpieces, guarantee favours down the line for politicians who changed their position. It probably could have been a hell of an operation, and for all I know it might even have worked.

I’d not bring the idea up to Julian. Not unless he really needed a laugh.

I groaned, forcing all thought of politics, politicians and whatever terrifying transition that the country might, at some undetermined point in the future, possibly go through, out of my mind. On the screen, Joe Pesci and Robert DeNiro stabbed and shot a man to death and buried him in the woods.

I was still tempted to see how they’d handle Brexit.

The next day, I woke up at around six. The afternoon hadn’t gone well in terms of forgetting about current events, and eventually I’d forced myself to go to bed at around ten o’clock. I never had any dreams, so it had seemed like a pretty safe bet.

And now, lying in bed, with over an hour before I even had to think of getting out of it, I remembered everything that had happened and wondered what other changes had joined it since yesterday.

I rolled onto my side, pulling the duvet over my head. Right now, I could do with a little more sleep.

When I arrived at the Civic Centre, I found myself once again looking around for any signs of recognition that things had changed. There weren’t any: all I saw were men and women, tired or bright-eyed, shabby or smart, walking towards the everyday nine-to-five. It was still tough to say whether that was reassuring or depressing.

I didn't see Sonia, although that was almost a relief. After our last face-to-face conversation, I was a little uncertain about our next encounter.

After a little more wandering than was strictly necessary, I made my way up to Julian's office. I was going to have to face the music sometime, and at least this was something that could absolutely not be blamed on me.

Not that that made me feel any better.

I knocked on the office door, something I hadn't done since I'd started working with him. There wasn't an answer, and I pushed the door open, stepping into the office.

Julian was inside, standing at the window with his back to me. The first thought through my mind was that I surprised he was taking so long to jump. Had he heard my knock? How long had he been standing here like this?

I shut the door behind me and stood in front of it, waiting. I didn't really know what for: I was prepared for anything from screaming incoherently to telling me to garrotte the manager of Trading Standards. I supposed he'd earned the right to overreact.

It took a while for him to turn around. I didn't say anything during that time, wanting him to do something – anything – but not wanting to provoke him into it.

Finally, he looked away from the window, turning towards the room. He didn't look good; in fact, he looked like he'd not slept at all over the weekend. But what I'd been waiting to see – what I'd hoped that I wouldn't spot but had known that I would – wasn't there. He didn't look beaten. I remembered how he'd seemed when Gateshead had said they were going to walk away from the devolution deal, before all of this, and he'd looked like a boxer who'd taken his first punch and realised that he wouldn't be able to fight through a second. It hadn't lasted long, and the moment he'd thought that there was a future past the next ten seconds he'd sparked right back to life, but there'd been a slump. And this Leave vote, according to the man himself, had just ripped devolution away from him and smashed it into pieces against the wall. He didn't have a way to make it work; he didn't have a project to elevate him back into Parliament in a few years. He had Newcastle City Council, the nephew of an old friend and not much else.

But to judge from how he was standing, he looked like he didn't know that, or he knew something that not many other people did know.

I waited. It felt like whatever he was going to say was going to be worth hearing.

'You tried to get in touch with me,' he said, a few seconds later.

‘A couple of times,’ I admitted. ‘I wanted to know if you were...’ I hesitated, briefly, ‘okay.’

He hesitated, just for a moment, and then gave one of his characteristic shrugs. I guessed that weekend was a closed topic. ‘Well,’ he said, eventually, ‘there’s not much that we can do about it, is there?’

‘No,’ I agreed. ‘There isn’t.’ I thought about whether to ask my next question, but Julian must have seen my expression, and managed the ghost of a smile.

‘Go on,’ he said. ‘Say it. I don’t think it’s going to be able to make anything worse.’

I supposed it couldn’t. ‘Devolution,’ I said. ‘What’s...what’s going to happen to it now? I mean...is the money still going to come from the EU, or what?’

He sighed. ‘I think the answer to that’s going to be the same as the answers to any questions you could ask: I haven’t the slightest fuck of an idea. I don’t think anyone does just yet. It’s pretty...’ he snorted. ‘It’s pretty low down on the list of everyone’s priorities.’

‘Your best guess?’ I persisted.

The silence went on for so long this time that I thought he wasn’t even going to bother answering. Just when I was on the verge of saying something else, he inhaled sharply.

‘It’s tricky,’ he said. ‘The money *does* come from the EU: most of it, anyhow. And even if it didn’t, we’re going to have a hell of a lot less to use. And, seeing as how the majority of the Conservatives are happy to pretend that there’s no such thing as the North, I’d say *we’re* pretty low down on the list of priorities too.’ He shook his head. ‘My best guess? Whatever money there is is going to have to be used to dig us out of the hole that fifty-two percent of the population just planted us in. And that’s before we get to the problems that money *can’t* solve.’

I nodded. I knew what he was thinking about. ‘There was a demonstration,’ I said. ‘In town, on Saturday. English Defence League, the papers said.’

‘I heard.’ Julian’s expression didn’t change, which was another surprise. Racism, even nationalism, had never failed to rouse some emotional response from him. ‘I think we’re going to be seeing a lot more of it in the near future. Stuff like that’s been brought to the surface; it didn’t just show up because of the referendum.’

‘Sonia said the same thing,’ I said. ‘She was...it gave her a bit of a shock.’

‘I can imagine.’ Julian gave me a quick glance. ‘You spent the weekend together?’

‘We thought it might be a good idea to try and keep each other afloat.’ I didn’t tell him how we’d managed that; I doubted he’d even have it in him to make a joke.

‘Probably a good idea. I didn’t start feeling like myself until your uncle called. Your doing, I’m guessing?’ When I nodded, he smiled, and it looked a little more natural this time. ‘You’re an interfering busybody, but it was probably exactly what I needed: someone telling me off in a posh English accent. He would have made an excellent schoolteacher.’ He glanced out the window again for a moment, as though he was suspicious that the landscape might suddenly change if he looked away for too long. ‘Anyway, I’m glad you had someone to spend time with. She seems extremely nice: the girl that you’re not in a relationship with.’

‘Actually...’ I didn’t know what I was doing; I hadn’t planned on telling him when I came in here. I hadn’t even talked to Sonia about telling anyone. ‘We...well, we started talking. After the news, and the shock. And...’ I gave a quick shrug, trying to play it off as something unimportant, ‘we’re giving it a try. I mean...I think that’s what we’re doing.’

For a second, Julian looked at me. He didn’t stare; there wasn’t any surprise or even that much emotion in his face. It was almost as if he hadn’t seen me before, or as though I’d somehow changed since the last time we’d been together.

I guessed, in some philosophical way, that every experience changed who we were, and I had just been through a weekend full of new experiences, but I didn’t think that was the reason.

Then, as if that second had been a moment where time had just frozen, he gave a brisk nod. ‘Good,’ he said. ‘She seemed...it seemed like the two of you fit together very well.’ I managed to keep my face completely straight as several graphic pictures sped across my memory. I couldn’t tell whether what he’d said had, in fact, been an attempt at a joke. Probably not.

‘Well, in terms of Newcastle, I doubt she’ll have too much more to upset her,’ Julian went on, with what seemed like an effort. ‘That demonstration was planned for a good three months in advance. It’s a pain in the arse, but it’s not like there was any way to legally stop them. The city’s had a good history with immigrants and people from other cultures. I doubt that many people are going to be swayed.’

‘I suppose not.’ I wondered whether telling Sonia that was likely to turn out positively. I still couldn’t predict her reactions.



‘Rest of Britain, though...’ Julian seemed to be talking more to himself now than to me. ‘Well, there’s been unrest for a while. Immigrant crisis, economy, unemployment. Things build up. And when you’ve got some twats making immigration the number one issue for a referendum like this, then ugly feelings are always going to come to the surface.’ He shook his head. ‘Still, hopefully people are going to be able to be rational. It’ll just be the EDL and Britain First who think this is going to be the start of some nationalist movement.’

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t quite share Julian’s optimistic view of people; I’d met too many bastards to have any notions about the intrinsic goodness of humanity. People, as far as I could tell, liked to have someone they were able to go after and feel justified in doing it. And, like Sonia said, if the referendum had managed to give some kind of legitimacy to that sentiment, then I didn’t think inner decency would win out.

Julian seemed to be waiting for me to say something else. When I didn’t, he sank back down into his chair, looking over his desk with the same dull expression he’d been wearing when I’d first come in. ‘Anyway,’ he said, ‘I suppose we’d better get started.’

It wasn’t until I was following him down the hallway that I remembered what hadn’t been mentioned by either of us: the list of MPs who’d been calling for Corbyn’s resignation. Had Uncle Andrew mentioned that? The pair of them seemed to be close, but Andrew Darnay wasn’t exactly what you’d call forthcoming. It would have been kind to let Julian know that one of his friends in high places might not be there for much longer, but I wasn’t certain whether Uncle Andrew had that in him.

Or, least probable of all, did Julian agree with the rest of them? In his mind, had Jeremy Corbyn not managed to live up to his responsibilities? Had he let Julian down once too often? Was Julian not quite above playing the game with the rest of them?

None of the answers really seemed to fit, and I didn’t feel comfortable asking him something like that. I was still fairly new to politics, but asking your boss and mentor if they were planning on joining a coup and stabbing their best friend in the back at the same time felt undiplomatic.

And behind it all was Uncle Andrew himself. God knew what he was thinking about this, if omniscience even stretched that far. I doubted anyone would ever hear him say it out loud.

As it was, it wasn’t until we were walking through the foyer of the Civic Centre that I was able to put it into words. Julian wasn’t moving at his usual pace, and I wasn’t

having to make such long, quick strides to keep level with him, which made conversation easier than it usually was.

‘Did you see the other news?’ I asked. ‘About...Corbyn?’

He managed to not quite stumble: it wasn’t as noticeable as that. There was, however, the slightest of missteps which, if I hadn’t been looking out for it, I may have missed entirely.

‘Yes,’ he said, once he’d regained some control. ‘Yes, I saw that.’

‘Do you think he’ll be alright?’

‘Alright as in “do you think his feelings are hurt” or alright as in “he’ll still be leader of the Labour Party?” Julian asked. There was an edge in his voice: a sharp sarcasm. I’d not heard him sound so bitter since I’d met him. He seemed to realise and shook his head. ‘I reckon he’ll weather it,’ he went on, his tone a little more moderate. ‘They’d need someone strong to run against him, and they don’t have all that many good prospects. Which isn’t normally an advantage, but in this situation? Could work out for him.’

‘Sonia thought he’d be gone by the weekend.’

Julian raised an eyebrow. ‘Well, I flatter myself on having just a touch more political insight, out of the two of us.’

‘Do you think they have a point?’ I went on, surprised that Sonia’s prediction had seemed to have touched his nerve quite so much. ‘You know, saying about him not doing enough for Remain?’

‘He did a hell of a lot more than most,’ he said, briskly. ‘People were expecting miracles from Jeremy. That’s part of the problem. He was supposed to be the second coming: the one who was going to put everything right. And he hasn’t managed it yet, so everyone’s convinced he’s failed. The papers are going after him too; he’s had to deal with more shit than anyone else this last year.’

‘And the MPs? Shouldn’t they know that?’

‘Loyalty’s not exactly a defining quality for people in politics. A fair few of them’ll secretly want to be the new leader, even if everyone else knows they’ve not got a hope. They’ll be convinced that they, or someone else, is going to be able to do better than him. That’ll be enough for them.’

‘So,’ Julian went on as we ascended some stairs, saving me the trouble of thinking up the next topic of conversation. ‘You and Sonia.’

‘Me and Sonia,’ I said. It wasn’t the subject I’d have picked, but the prospect of teasing me for the next eternity might almost put him in good spirits. And Sonia had gotten a few decent jabs in at Julian over the last few days, so fair was fair. ‘It just sort of...well, it happened.’

He managed another smile. ‘You did look like you were working your way through the cocktails pretty well.’

‘It wasn’t like that,’ I protested. ‘It was the next morning, when everything was over. We got talking about it...us...that’s just how it happened.’ That was an abridged version, but I wasn’t up to describing my sexual encounters to the leader of Newcastle’s City Council. ‘She’s...really awesome.’

Julian snorted. “‘Really awesome.’ Whatever happened to poetry? Romance? Youth’s wasted on the young. You were an English Literature student, for God’s sake.’

‘It’s the fourth day of the relationship,’ I pointed out. ‘I don’t think I’m supposed to bust out the poetry just yet. Might creep her out.’

‘She’s probably made of sterner stuff than you think,’ said Julian. ‘I mean, the whole Indian thing. As far as I’m aware, dating a white man is *not* something that her parents are supposed to be happy with. Dating at all, actually.’

I hadn’t considered that. Truth be told, I hadn’t considered a lot about the future. Meeting Sonia’s parents wasn’t something I’d given much serious thought to. That, along with professing my love to her poetically, would probably be moving too fast.

‘There’s going to be a meeting,’ Julian said, a few moments later. ‘I made a few calls this morning, just to see where the other leaders stood. It’s probably a wise idea if we gather together and sort a few things out: get on the same team. If things are looking dicey and none of us agree with each other, that’ll just do more damage.’

‘You reckon some of them’ll want to stop it?’

We turned a corner, heading towards the library. There’d been some kind of remodelling done, or so I seemed to remember, and Julian had agreed to put in an appearance. I wondered if they’d particularly mind getting Julian Ashworth minus a couple of nights sleep.

‘It’s always possible,’ he admitted. ‘You saw what Gateshead’s council did. Some of them might want to push it through: take the money and run, before anyone really knows what’ll happen. Others’ll figure that the deal’s going to fall through or not be worth it anymore, and they’ll want to get out of it before it drags out. We’ll see what happens at the meeting.’

I was on the verge of pressing him, but I gave up. I had my own problems to deal with and, while it might not have been the nicest way of thinking about it, I didn't have a lot of time or patience for other people's.

The walk around the library took us almost an hour, including photographs, coffee and the various shaking of hands which, of course, had to happen. Julian probably presented a decent enough face to the outside world, but to me it was like watching him sleepwalk through it all. Still, I'd spent the day after the referendum bracing myself for a suicide attempt, so this was certainly better than what I'd expected. After the event was over, we made our way back to Julian's office, where I sat and scrolled through various news websites as Julian did his best to answer emails and make phone calls.

Things seemed to be moving pretty fast, and Julian wanted to know every new detail. He, along with many other people, had expected that the Prime Minister would resign after the failure of Remain, to which he had lent his support. He also seemed very certain who our next head of state was to be.

'It'll be May,' he said, matter-of-factly. He'd just put down the phone and had allowed me to read him the list of proposed names. Most of them had been Brexiteers, and Theresa May was the notable exception. 'She's the only reasonably sane one of the bunch.'

'And you think that we, as a nation, are in favour of sanity?' I asked, flicking a pencil in the air and catching it.

'Fuck no, but the people aren't going to be the ones who pick the new PM. It's not an election; it's *leadership* election. People don't enter into it. Just Conservatives. And,' he added, after a moment, 'they've got rules in place that means a load of people can't just join up and flood the Party with their votes.'

'Like with Corbyn?'

'Exactly like with him,' he agreed. 'But then, Jeremy's pretty sane too.' He leaned back in his chair, looking at the ceiling in contemplation. 'It's not going to be Johnson: too much of a wildcard. Gove doesn't have the charisma or the clout, and the members are going to vote for a forceful personality. Crabb is a religious nutter; Leadsom is just as religious but even nuttier, and Hunt is best known for trying to dismantle the NHS, so they won't put their precious scapegoat up there.' He shook his head. 'It'll be May. Far from the worst person for the job. A little authoritarian and quite possibly the

reincarnated form of Margaret Thatcher, but you can't have everything. Nope,' he finished, almost breezily, 'it'll be May for four years.'

'What if there's a general election?' I asked. 'Won't she call one?'

'Why?' he asked, sounding honestly curious. 'I wouldn't. Not if I'd just become leader of a party with a parliamentary majority, and I'd like to think that I'm pretty sane too.'

'Labour Party's trying to tear itself apart,' I pointed out. 'If they took advantage now, they could –'

'They could what? Gain one year, call it a mandate? Not worth the risk. All any of the parties would have to do would be to put out a competent plan for Brexit, and I can't see the Conservatives hanging onto all their seats: they'd be fending off attacks from everywhere, maybe even a UKIP surge. Smartest thing she can do is use the next four years to build a good argument for keeping her as Prime Minister.'

'If she becomes Prime Minister.'

He gave me a look. 'Two months,' he said. 'By then, anyone else in the race will have realised how it's going to go. And if not, then the Party'll be sure to help them realise.'

People had talked about the referendum results in the same way, I thought to myself, but I didn't say that. Conversing about politics seemed to be doing wonders for Julian's mood, and I didn't want to push him into a sulk.

I was still not certain about his temperament. Certainly, the result had been a knock for him, but there was something which kept him on his feet and moving. As we moved around the city, I could see him thinking: maybe it was planning; maybe he was just looking for a plan. But his eyes were moving about the buildings: the Victorian, the modern and the brutal. I wondered what he was thinking about and what he might have been seeing. I didn't feel up to asking him.

The rest of the day moved along quickly and, before I knew it, it was quitting time. I caught the bus home, finally feeling relief after all of the trepidation which had been building up in me before this morning. The hard part was over: Julian and I had gotten through day one post-referendum and neither one of us had jumped out of any windows.

Once I'd showered and changed, I made my way back into town. I was struck by how ordinary everything seemed. So many parts of life had been altered or somehow affected, but somehow people kept going on, much the same as they had before.

I wasn't sure what I'd expected and even less sure of what I wanted. Riots? Mob rule? Gangs of outlaws and vigilantes racing along the A167 on motorbikes, shooting up the place? Something to show that what was going to happen didn't sit well with almost half the country's population would have been nice, even if it wouldn't have been the most mature reaction.

Maybe most of that half had stopped caring. It probably felt like a safe bet.

I was a little early to the restaurant, which Sonia had booked. It was a warm, bustling Italian place: part of a chain, but pleasant and welcoming for all that. I decided to wait for her at the bar, but didn't feel up to having a drink, not even after a day of handling the unexploded bomb that was Julian Ashworth post-referendum. I settled for a sparkling water and a double espresso, both of which would do far more for me than anything alcoholic.

I let the espresso cool, sipping the water slowly. I was wondering again about how Julian had been today, particularly his unexpected resilience. Was he getting better at handling disappointment by this point, or was his the defiant energy of someone about to walk? Were his days in the political sphere, even at this outer layer, numbered? Did he feel as though the system had let him down, or had failed on a greater level? Was I going to have to find myself a new way of putting off employment soon? What would that mean for me and Sonia? I liked living in the North East, although as a Southerner I was certain that that sort of thought qualified as treason. I doubted that mine and Sonia's fresh relationship would survive me moving away for an undetermined amount of time, but what was there for me to do here without Julian and the council?

It was a messy situation, I thought, and not one that I should ruin an evening by obsessing over it. I didn't have any idea what was going to happen past my own paranoia, and Sonia was probably in just as much need of a quiet night as I was.

I took a small sip of the espresso. It was too bitter, tasting acrid and burned. I shot it back, not keen on prolonging the experience, and washed my mouth out with the water.

Then a hand touched me on the shoulder, and I turned, smiling in anticipation of seeing Sonia. She was wearing a pale blue sundress, her hair hanging loosely down her back. 'Hey you,' she said. 'Not hitting the sauce already, are you?'

'Afraid not,' I said. 'Thought I might have a dry month. I feel like the last couple of days have been like a cumulative hangover for all the drinking I've gotten done in my life.'

Sonia rolled her eyes. ‘Because *nothing* good happened over the last few days, right? Like, I don’t know, spending a lot of time with a pretty fantastic grad student?’ She raised an eyebrow, and then grinned at my expression. ‘Ah. Long day, I’m guessing. Come on: you can tell me all about it. I promise not to yawn.’ She took my arm, and we headed for our table. Her mood was a big contrast to the last time we’d spoken, and I wondered whether she was trying to over-compensate because of how we’d left things. I didn’t mention it, and neither did she.

Once at the table, I ordered another fizzy water; Sonia followed suit. ‘I might join you in the detox,’ she said. ‘Although that’s partly because I am completely out of most spirits, and I think it’s going to be a choice between restocking the bar and buying food.’

‘Plus,’ I said, ‘any alcohol from inside the EU stands a fair chance of getting pricier.’

‘There is also that,’ she agreed. ‘So, go on. How did he take it? Has he recruited you to assassinate any of the potential PMs yet?’

‘Actually,’ I said, ‘he took it better than I thought. I think he’s starting to bounce back.’

Sonia looked surprised. ‘Fair play to him,’ she said. ‘The way he was talking about devolution when I met him, I’d not have been surprised if you were the one to find his body this morning.’

I nodded. ‘And...how are you doing?’ I asked. ‘I mean...I know that last time we...it wasn’t...’ I stopped, aware that my attempts to explain were probably making things more confusing. Sonia was watching me, apparently happy to let me obscure matters even more. ‘Are you alright?’ I settled for asking. It wasn’t me at my most eloquent, but after the day I’d had I was happy with ‘close enough’.

She was about to answer, when the waiter came by to deliver our drinks. After she’d taken a sip of hers, she looked at me again. ‘To be honest, it’s not been fantastic. There have been times where I’ve managed to forget about it, but it’s not been easy. It’s just...well, knowing that some people voted for something so massive because they hate you and people like you: it was a bit of a shake-up.’ She shook her head. ‘It’s...we don’t have to talk about it now, though. This isn’t the time.’

‘We can, if you want to,’ I persisted. ‘If it’d make you feel any better...?’

‘I don’t think it would.’ She paused, and then took my hand in hers, giving it a squeeze. ‘But thank you. Thanks for asking: I mean it.’ She took another drink and

smiled. 'So, go on. What *did* Julian say? If he mentioned creating an independent city state, then you owe me dessert.'

I laughed. 'I thought this was your treat.'

'Wasn't planning on dessert. Spill the details, Barrett.'

We spent most of the first course discussing and speculating on Julian's state of mind. It certainly filled out the time. By the time I'd finished the rest of the story, Sonia's mood had improved by a wide margin and she had the usual smile she got when she was trying to get the bottom of something. When I mentioned Julian's dismissal of her Corbyn theory, it looked as though she was on the verge of making a comment, but she remained silent, watching me as I went on.

I was still brooding slightly about my day with the leader of Newcastle City Council, particularly the comment he'd made about Sonia's parents. Something about it chafed at me, enough that I couldn't quite forget it even if I wasn't sure why it should bother me.

It wasn't that I was trying to plan out our wedding or name our children already: even I wasn't that clueless. I just couldn't get over the possibility that there was more trouble on the horizon. And if that was to be the case, then I would far sooner know in advance. I'd had far too many surprises over the last week.

As Sonia began to chat about her day, I found that, no matter how much attention I tried to pay to what she was saying, it began to register less and less. I'd always been terrible at dealing with the unknown since I could remember, and apparently that hadn't changed.

Finally, I became aware that Sonia had stopped talking and was looking at me, one eyebrow raised in ironic query.

I shifted in my seat, embarrassed at being caught out. 'Sorry,' I said. 'Just sort of phased out there.'

'I noticed,' she said. 'Something on your mind, champ? You're usually a lot better at pretending to listen.'

'I don't usually *pretend* to listen,' I said. 'I didn't think I did, anyway.'

She shook her head. 'You get lost in your own thoughts a fair bit. You end up listening to your own inner monologue. Must be more interesting than me.'

'Afraid not.'

Sonia smiled. 'I know. So, go on. What was so important that you were able to tune out your fascinating girlfriend?'



I gave up; I didn't have much of a story ready in any case. 'It was something that Julian said today. Just been on my mind.'

'Ah.' Sonia leaned back in her chair. 'Is he jealous? Trying to warn you off me?'

'Not exactly.'

Both eyebrows raised now, in honest surprise. 'Right, I was expecting more of a firm "no" there, Tom.' She flashed a grin. 'Does he not think that women and politicians mix? Is he trying to stop me from becoming a mysterious photograph in your study one day?' She waited for a moment, presumably to see if the joke would coax a smile out of me. When I didn't produce one, her expression became more serious. 'Go on, then. What did he say? Is he some kind of mad racist, because if so he covers it up really well.'

'No,' I said. 'Not like that. It was just something he said about your parents.'

'Does he know them?'

'I don't think so. It was more a...general thing. About Indian parents. And relationships.'

Her face cleared, her expression showing comprehension. 'I see. What exactly did he say?'

I gave a shrug, growing embarrassed again. I'd hoped not to have to make such a sweeping generalisation out loud.

Then again, there wasn't any smoke without fire, and there were rarely stereotypes without a story behind them.

'He said they might not be so happy with you going out with...me. Or,' I added, 'anyone, really.'

Sonia's mouth had opened right after I'd said it, but then she closed it and stayed quiet for a while. Her eyes remained on me, but she seemed deep in thought. I waited, slightly ashamed that I'd asked, although still curious to hear what she was going to say.

Finally, she leaned forward, resting her chin on her hands, still looking at me. 'Well, he's not wrong. Wasn't planning on really having this conversation *right now* but, seeing as how you asked...yeah, they'd be pissed.' She laughed suddenly, unexpectedly. 'I mean, if they found out I'd kissed guys, they'd hit the roof. If they thought I was *fucking* anyone...' She snorted, laughing again. 'Yeah, I can't even imagine. So, yes: he's right.' She caught my eye, and grinned. 'Sorry: just imagining

that conversation. You have no idea how sneaky I've had to be. If I ever walk past you in town and completely blank you, then my parents are with me.'

'Not planning on letting them know, then?'

'Oh no. Not at all. Terrible idea: so much yelling. Had enough of that for a lifetime. I plan on keeping you all to myself.'

'Ah.' There wasn't that much else to say to that. I'd never been told that I was going to be a secret before. I still wasn't all that sure how I felt about it. Part of me wanted to laugh about it. Another part couldn't help but feel insulted by what I'd just been told. I knew that there were other factors, and I most definitely knew that there wasn't anything personal in any of it: how could there be, when her parents didn't even know I existed?

Still, I had at least a little ego, and that same ego wasn't great at dealing with the idea that I was somehow unsuitable: not to be mentioned in polite company.

Sonia had her all-too-perceptive gaze on me still, and I had the most horrible feeling that she knew exactly what had been passing through my mind. It seemed likely: she'd been in relationships before, even if they hadn't gone well. For all I knew, this was the exact reason for that.

'Tom,' she said, 'I know it's not...well, I don't exactly know what it's like. But I know that it's not ideal. Trust me: I've been told that before. That's why I wanted to be honest with you from the outset which, by the way, is a first when it comes to this. I know that this isn't what anyone wants to hear. But it can't be different.' She sighed. 'I may not be my parents' biggest fan, but telling them about us would lead to a whole lot of problems, and I'm not willing to go through that. Maybe...maybe one day, if things look like they're going to get serious, then that's something we're going to have to talk about. But right now, it's just asking for trouble.'

'I get it,' I said. 'It's just...it was a bit of a shock. I wasn't exactly expecting it.'

Sonia nodded. 'Yeah, none of them did.'

'Is that why none of them went well?'

She looked at me in surprise, then shook her head. 'Not all of them. Some managed to screw things up before that conversation, so you've got that going for you. But yeah: it's never gone over well.' She gave another laugh, with less humour in it. 'Planning on having a Brexit of your own?'

I didn't laugh with her, instead looking at her seriously. 'Of course not,' I said. 'It's unexpected, but...well, I'll get used to it. Hopefully.'

‘Hopefully,’ she agreed.

We sat in silence for a time, broken only when the waiter ferried over our main courses. I’d ordered the pizza; she’d selected the tagliatelle. We ate without speaking for a few minutes, both of us savouring the silence as much as we did the food. After all that had just been said, neither of us seemed keen to open up the conversation once again.

Sonia finally pushed the remainder of her tagliatelle away. ‘Wow,’ she groaned. ‘Now I know why so many Italians are fat guys.’

I’d finished the entirety of my pizza a few minutes ago, and I decided not to comment.

‘Got to say,’ she continued, ‘I think this is the tipping point. I’m going back to the gym.’

‘I didn’t know you ever went.’

She gave me a look, but I was already wincing at the unfortunate phrasing. ‘Okay,’ she said, ‘*rude*. But yes, I used to go. Yoga, Zumba, the occasional bit of running. I used to go jogging around Gosforth in the evenings, but...yeah, maybe not that now.’

‘What, because of...?’ I threw up a subtle Nazi salute, or as subtle as that sort of thing gets. Sonia spat out some of her drink and nodded, still spluttering.

‘We could always find a gym near both of us,’ I said. ‘I could always do with getting back into shape.’

‘You’re not that bad. And I sort of like to stay isolated when I work out: helps clear my head; I can get my thoughts in order.’

‘Daydream about a certain young assistant to a Labour councillor?’

She nodded. ‘If I can get the image of said-young assistant passionately kissing that Labour councillor out of my head.’

‘You’ve got a real fixation on my imaginary gay affair.’

Sonia winked. ‘You should be flattered. Usually I move on from fantasies pretty quickly.’ She paused, and then went on, ‘Is Julian actually...’ She started to make a hand gesture of her own, then apparently thought better of it and settled for saying, ‘gay?’

I shrugged. ‘Honestly, I’ve no idea. No mention of a girlfriend, boyfriend, past loves. All of his friends are politicians, and most of his enemies too. Only thing I’ve seen him do outside of politics is drink and occasionally sulk.’

‘He’s got to have a hobby. Everyone’s got a hobby. I mean...*you’ve* got a hobby, right?’

‘Drinking,’ I said, ‘although I’m now taking a break. I used to enjoy being part of the European Union, but that’s been a bust.’ I grinned. ‘Does sleeping with you count as a hobby?’

‘More like a gift from God.’

‘Hindu or Christian?’

‘Multi-denominational. Continue.’

‘And I recently took up the practice of not-existing to a certain Indian family.’ I waved a hand before Sonia could take it the wrong way. ‘I used to enjoy writing. Did journalism in uni, but that didn’t turn out so great.’

‘What happened?’ she asked. ‘Did you mess with the wrong crowd, and this is you in witness protection? Did the Proctor put a hit out on you?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Because I went to university in Chicago during the 1920s.’ Sonia was grinning, and I knew that if I changed the subject then she’d not push it. Not forget it, certainly, but not try to get an answer just now. But I realised, for the first time, that I didn’t mind telling this story: not to her. She’d just been very honest with me about something just as personal, and if I felt like I could reciprocate then there didn’t seem like there was a reason not to.

I took a breath. ‘No,’ I went on. ‘I tried to run a story that people didn’t want coverage of: tampering in the student union elections. We got told that there was no story and we were to forget about it. So, I ran it anyway, and it turns out that nothing we tried to say mattered unless it was a reason for us to get bollocked. Nothing happened; no-one cared or tried to do anything about it. Sort of soured my whole perspective on “getting the news to the people”.’

I let out a breath, reeling somewhat from the fact that I’d told someone this story completely willingly. Besides telling it to Julian, the only other times I’d related it was to give my side of the story to a disciplinary committee assembled by the university (who’d told me in various terms not to do it again) and having it dragged out of me by my mother (who’d threatened to drag other things out of me too).

It didn’t feel as bad as I’d thought. I felt vulnerable: more open to criticism and ridicule than I usually did, but in a small way it was a relief. Now someone else knew, and I’d told them because I’d wanted to.

‘And you figured that politics was going to be a way more moral environment?’ Sonia asked.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘they did get information out over the EU: loads of it. But it just was mostly lying and fear-mongering and entirely disprovable.’

‘People still believed it,’ Sonia pointed out.

‘People are idiots.’

‘Not everyone.’ Sonia seemed to consider something for a moment. ‘And I reckon that’s a pretty simplified look at the situation.’

I didn’t argue. She was probably right. By and large, situations tended to be complicated unless the people involved happened to be toddlers, and I tried to avoid toddlers as much as I could.

I wondered how they’d have voted.

Neither of us fancied dessert, so I ordered another espresso while Sonia opted for a chamomile tea. ‘You’ll not sleep a wink,’ she said, eyeing the tiny cup I was holding.

‘I wasn’t planning on sleeping just yet,’ I replied. I indicated her own, larger cup. ‘You, on the other hand, are going to be unconscious by the time we get home.’

‘Then my big, strong man can carry me back.’

I smiled. ‘Well, it beats going to back to the gym.’ Her kick found my ankle, hopefully harder than she’d intended, almost making me drop the espresso.

‘Sorry,’ she said, realising what she’d done. ‘But also, screw you.’

‘Well, that’s what I was hoping to get around to –’ This time, the kick wasn’t as hard, and there was the suggestion of a smile on her face.

Despite a token effort on my part, Sonia insisted on paying the bill and, after a short discussion, we made our way out of the city towards the flat. She was already starting to get a little quieter on the bus and, by the time we’d walked through my front door, she was down to murmured monosyllables.

Despite her tiredness, there was still a vague attempt on her part to seduce me. That ended about a minute in with her slumping against my chest, muttering a half-yawned apology. Still quite awake from my coffee, I lay there with my arms around her, listening to her quiet breaths turning into slightly louder snores. Every so often, she would seem to wake up again, sleepily shift position, and then drift off once again. Finally, after some time, the darkness of my room turned into a sleep of my own.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

When we woke up, it was half past six: a good bit of time before we needed to get out of bed. Through a conversation filled with long pauses and tired sighs, we agreed to find a place in town for breakfast: my way of returning the favour for last night. That left us time for a shared shower, and a chance to engage in a little of what Sonia had been too tired for the previous night.

Finally, we made our way out into town, exploring the different cafés and diners before finding one which we both took a liking to: an unassuming place called Blake's. I chose a breakfast sandwich, packed with as many different parts of a pig as was feasibly possible; Sonia decided on smoked salmon and scrambled eggs.

'Unexpected perk of this relationship,' she said. 'It's nice having someone who likes eating out as much as I do.'

I didn't comment on the turn of phrase but smiled. 'Not a fan of eating out alone?'

'Is anyone really? Who do you talk to? What do you do when you're not eating? How do you stop yourself from looking sad and lonely?'

'Is that what I am, then?' I asked. 'Someone to take out for meals?'

She glanced around her, checking that nobody was listening in, and then leaned forward with a grin. 'And somebody to take to bed after.'

'If only to use them as a mattress.'

Sonia shrugged. 'Can't be perfect all the time.'

I was on the verge of retorting when my phone started ringing. I looked, puzzled, at Sonia, and then reached into my pocket. I wondered if this was Julian: whether his breakdown hadn't been avoided so much as simply put off.

To my surprise, the word on my phone's screen said 'HOME'. Even more curious, I made an apologetic face to Sonia and picked up the call.

'Hello?'

*'Tom, darling? Do you remember me? It's your mother.'*

I rolled my eyes. So, it was going to be one of *those* conversations. 'Vaguely. Something wrong?'

*'Well, I'm a little annoyed at how easy you find it to not talk to me, but if you mean "is there some kind of emergency", then no.'*

‘I see.’ I didn’t bother to bring up the fact that communication was a two-way street. Logic, no matter its setting, was never a useful tool against Mrs Amelia Barrett. ‘So, should I settle in for a lecture? I’m sort of having breakfast.’

*‘Oh? And is the new girlfriend there?’*

Sonia, who had been following the conversation with silent amusement (Mum’s normal speaking voice could have carried over an orchestral performance of Stravinsky’s greatest hits), stared at me, eyes wide with surprise and alarm. I shook my head at her frantically, then turned my attention back to Mum.

‘Who told you?’

*‘Who do you think? Andrew, of course. Because, out of the two of you, he actually bothers to get in touch sometimes.’*

A true politician, I thought: always in complete command of his public image. Uncle Andrew was even more devious than I’d given him credit for. I assumed that he’d gotten the news of me and Sonia making it official from Julian; it would be nice if I could have a man in my life who wouldn’t leak sensitive information to either the general population or my mother.

‘Ah,’ I said. ‘I probably should have told you —’

*‘Not at all,’* Mum said, cutting right across me. *‘I’m sure it’s completely your own business who you’re involved with. I just don’t think that it’s too much to ask to receive a phone call every few weeks, letting me know that you’ve not been murdered by Northerners.’*

‘It’s not *Game of Thrones*, Mum; there is civilisation up here.’ I glanced down guiltily at my sausage, bacon and black pudding stottie and quickly changed the subject. ‘So, was there any other reason for the call, or are you just checking I’ve not started drinking Newcastle Brown Ale?’

*‘I called,’* Mum replied, with a haughty dignity, *‘to let you know that Jenny and Rita are getting married. They announced it last night on Facebook but seeing as you seem determined to cut yourself off from your entire family, I don’t suppose that you’ll have seen it.’*

‘Wait, seriously?’ I sat forward, grinning. Jenny was a second cousin, and one of the few members of the family who’d not managed to become a vague imitation of the others. Rita, her girlfriend of several years and now, I supposed, her fiancée of several hours, was just as wonderful: easy to talk to and one of the best drinking companions and bad influences that a teenage Tom could have hoped for.

*‘Well, I assume so. Otherwise they’ve been extremely committed to a very odd practical joke. We’ve planned a bit of a party for them, next weekend. It’ll be at Andrew’s house, so you don’t even have the excuse of not wanting to pay for a hotel room. We expect you to make time, even if you do miss out on a weekend of drinking Lambrini in an alleyway.’*

Sonia spat out some of her espresso, visibly shaking with laughter. I gave her a kick under the table, which didn’t help matters at all, and tried to keep my voice from giving anything away. ‘God, I *wish* I could afford Lambrini. I’m trying to ferment potatoes in my radiator.’

‘Mmm,’ my mother commented, as though this fitted in neatly with every assessment she’d made regarding me. ‘Well, *that’s what I called to say. And, of course, to tell you that I missed and loved you, not that you care.*’

‘Mmm.’ Two could play at her game, even if she had years of experience on me. ‘So, this would be one of those offers I can’t refuse?’

*‘I suppose you could call it that, if you were being dramatic. And bring this girl of yours along as well; she should meet the family. See that you’re not the sole representative of the rest of us.’* There was a brief pause. *‘Only if she’d like to, of course.’* Her voice left no question of what she thought about the possibility of a refusal.

I glanced at Sonia, whose face was now hidden in her hands, and sighed. ‘I’ll ask her, I promise. But if she says no –’

*‘Then you’re still coming. You can’t use people as an excuse, Tom; I keep telling you. Now, isn’t it about time that you should be going to work? You’ve not been falling into the habit of turning up late, have you?’*

I cast a despairing glance up at the heavens. Of course she wouldn’t allow me to escape the conversation without a parting admonishment. ‘You’re probably right,’ I said. ‘I’d better get going. I’ll call you later to get the exact details.’ I’d text, I decided. Two conversations with Mum in one day would be a little much. I didn’t know how Dad and Uncle Andrew had managed all these years. ‘Thanks for letting me know.’

*‘I’ll expect a call sometime after five,’* she said. *‘Have a pleasant day at work, dear. And do invite your girlfriend, won’t you? What’s her name, anyway?’*

‘Sonia,’ I said. ‘Her name is Sonia. Bye, Mum.’

I hung up and looked at Sonia, who was doing her best to stop laughing. When she’d regained some control, she managed to face me, resting her elbows on the table



and grinning broadly. 'Fuck me,' she said. '*That's* the potential mother-in-law? Your inheritance had better be absurdly huge.'

'Not keen on visiting with me next week, then?' I asked, not blaming her in the slightest.

'Are you kidding?' Her smile still stretched from ear to ear as she picked up her fork and began attacking her scrambled eggs again. 'Wouldn't miss this for the world. Count me in.' She paused to swallow some salmon, and then looked thoughtfully at me. 'I'd not have pegged your family as the lesbian wedding sort,' she said. 'I heard that right, didn't I? Jenny and Rita?'

I nodded. 'You heard right. And no: I'm sure there'll be one or two people who aren't going to be thrilled about this. We're not Catholics or anything: not even that religious. Just...' I shrugged.

'Conservative.' Sonia said. I nodded again. One way or another, that was about right.

'Seriously, though,' I asked, a few moments later. 'You really want to come down South and meet the family? It's not...you don't think it's too early?'

She shook her head. 'It's not like we're announcing our own wedding. We're just going out, and your Mum invited me over. And I think I want to see where –' she gestured at me '– all this came from.'

'I think this is in spite of them rather than because of them,' I said, smiling.

'Then it'll be interesting to see what might have been,' said Sonia, spearing the final piece of salmon with her fork. 'You can't get rid of me, Tom. I'm coming with you.'

It might have been a remnant of the recent conversation with Mum, but I assumed that there'd be no future in arguing with her, and so left it at that.

\* \* \*

The following fortnight was unusual. This was partly because there seemed to be, on the surface, a lack of anything out of the ordinary happening at all. Newcastle upon Tyne, just as it had right after the referendum, continued on as much as it had been before, as though it refused to dignify the nation's decision with any kind of reaction. It seemed that I, at the very least, was waiting for the drop of a shoe which was taking a very long time indeed to descend.

The other part of it was, of course, that there *were* so many unusual things happening. The Chilcot Report hammered a nail in Tony Blair's coffin, whilst it

seemed that every day we were gifted with another report of American police shooting an unarmed citizen. I'd expected Julian to be further infuriated by the news that Hillary Clinton, now the Democratic candidate for presidency, had been judged to have been 'extremely careless' with information vital to the nation's security and yet was still the strongest horse in the race. Julian, however, had taken the revelation with the same black, distant humour with which he'd been taking most things lately.

And, of course, there was no ignoring the constant and ludicrous presence of Donald Trump in the political theatre. That, more than anything, was what lent day-to-day life its feeling of constant strangeness. If it was any other country, it was something which could be safely ignored, perhaps even laughed about as a typical example of the kind of madness that foreigners loved to engage in. And now, right after the revelation which had shot through the country, maybe that was something, more than ever, that we all needed: to laugh again.

But Donald Trump was, in reality, a few steps away from the most powerful office in the entire world, and that prospect was far less easy to laugh about unless the idea of chaos and the possibility of disaster on a world-wide scale happened to tickle your funny bone particularly.

On the topic of Trump, Julian had been less amused and far more vocal. There was no insult, no denouncement and no damnation too strong to be hurled at the man who could be president, and inside of two weeks I'd heard every last one of them. Before the referendum, it seemed, the idea had been so bizarre as to be impossible. But with the social blindfold, as it were, removed, the idea that Donald Trump might one day hold the reins of power was a thought that could no longer be dismissed.

Mostly, I avoided the topic. All the colourful insults in the world weren't worth increasing the likelihood of giving Julian a rage-induced heart attack.

Julian had at least provided the answer to one mystery: the very same which Sonia and I had been unable to solve. He'd told me the morning of Mum's call, looking just as tired but even more alive than he had been the day before. I wondered how long a man could last on coffee and no sleep.

'It's going to be an eco-park,' he said, proudly.

I raised my eyebrows politely. 'What's an eco-park?'

Julian waved a hand. 'Doesn't actually matter: it can mean whatever people want it to mean. What matters is what it can be.'

'Which is...?'

He pushed himself up from his chair, walking around to the window. I followed, under the assumption that he wanted me to see whatever he was going to imagine out there.

‘The North East needs housing,’ he said. ‘Newcastle certainly does. And not just housing either: in the near future this place is going to need jobs once we see some of the businesses shipping out.’

There had been promises from a lot of companies and businesses that they weren’t going to be leaving, but I didn’t remind him of that: he was rolling.

‘So, what’s going on here is a way to solve a few problems with one idea,’ he went on. ‘The creation of two thousand sustainable jobs, building houses constructed from sustainable materials, powered by sustainable energy: wind turbines, solar power, maybe even the Kielder hydroelectric dam if that’s not insane.’ He paused for a moment, apparently weighing that up, and then ploughed on. ‘We’re talking about houses for social workers, teachers, firemen, paramedics, police officers: key workers. People who we should be taking care of, because they take care of everyone else.’

It all sounded good so far but for one thing. ‘How would you pay for this, though? You can’t rely on money from the EU to fund it, and it’s not like the Government’s going to hand it over. Not now.’

‘Not this government,’ Julian agreed. ‘But that’s the beauty of this thing: the entire point of it. *Sustainable*. It sustains itself, all of it.’ He gestured out of the window, apparently to Newcastle in general. ‘The city funds it.’

Suddenly he’d stepped away from the window, walking smartly back to the desk as though unable to be far away from his work. He took his seat, watching me as I approached. ‘What would you say the average price of a domestic property would be in Newcastle? To the nearest ten thousand.’

I couldn’t imagine. I knew that Julian knew, and I’d bet that Sonia did as well considering the nature of her work, but I’d not paid much attention to housing except for when it came up in the T. Dan Smith biography. ‘Three hundred thousand?’ I hazarded.

Julian grinned, shaking his head. ‘Spoken like a true Londoner, if a slightly more realistic one,’ he said. ‘The answer you’re looking for is around a hundred and seventy thousand if done by the mean average. The median is...’ He glanced for a moment around his paper-covered desk, then shrugged, ‘not really that important. Anyway, it’s not like we could set a tax that low: we’d be screwing the very kinds of people we’d

want to help. But what we *can* do is set a tax which would kick in when a property is sold for, say, two hundred and fifty thousand pounds. Above that price, a certain amount of profit would be retained by this council to fund the new community.'

He sat back in his chair, looking at me almost eagerly. I was still running the idea through my head, trying to grasp each part of it. I knew that he wasn't waiting for a snap answer; he liked me to think things out.

'Is there the space for that?' I asked at last. Besides the money, the source of which was still a concern, that was the next question.

Julian nodded. 'We'd have to expand: open up some more of the green belt to some development, but I'm fairly confident that we can work through that. Any properties could be taken care of by compulsory purchase; there's not going to be too much of that. Call it a little over a thousand.'

This time I didn't take as much time. 'That's going to piss quite a few people off. As well as the people who are going to think that they're getting screwed when they try to sell their house and the council takes a piece.'

'What are they going to do?' Julian asked. 'Vote Conservative? I'd bet most of the people who'll be angered by that already do. And, if they don't, then I doubt that this is going to be the policy which pushes them over the line. Not to mention that the Government's not going to care too much about this happening in a Labour stronghold; they've got more important things going on anyway.' He shrugged. 'Short of the courts stopping it, I really don't know what could stand in its way.'

'*Would* the courts stop it?' I asked.

Julian gave another shrug. 'They might. I don't know enough about the law to say. But it wouldn't be a cut-and-dry no, which is good enough for the time being. We could open it up to some co-operation between the councils. Devolution might be in a bit of a state, but a few of them working together on this might be just what's needed...'

There wasn't much else to say, or at least no other questions I could come up with on the spot. I let Julian go on talking about everything that this could lead to: a science park, a sports centre, schools, a swimming pool. With every sentence, his dream grew. I listened, wondering how much of this was some notion cannibalised from devolution. Sonia had been looking at compulsory purchase orders the day we'd first had drinks, but that could have been for any reason.

I had no idea how likely it was to happen. I recognised that Julian was intelligent and had seen him put together a strategy or an agreement which had won the support of the meeting or committee he'd suggested it to multiple times. If he thought that it was possible then it might be. And if it kept him in Newcastle and in a good mood, that worked out well for me. But there was more to it than that.

Julian, I knew by now, did have an ego. He wasn't narcissistic or vainglorious; he didn't think that he was better than other people based on some homemade criteria, or at least he kept it to himself if he ever did think it. Most of Julian's pride stemmed from a job well done, and he could be his own worst critic whenever he fell short. But he wanted the opportunity to do that job; he wanted to the pride and satisfaction of working on and accomplishing something which improved people's lives.

For all that this might work, and no matter how many lives this could improve, this was more than a well-meaning policy. For him, it was a lifeline: a piece of purpose that he was using to hold himself upright. He had talked in much the same way about devolution, and of the Labour Party's plans to improve the nation before that. He had sought out a role which would allow him to keep moving.

In part, it was a relief to know that he had found something. The other part of me was busy thinking about another leader of Newcastle City Council, and where his interest in housing and his need to be doing something had led him.

\* \* \*

'At least he's not shot himself,' Sonia said, in a tone of voice which implied that this was a mildly pleasant turn of events. 'Not in the head, anyway,' she added, after a moment's consideration.

'You don't think it's a good idea?'

'I think it's what you said it is: something to do so that he can do something. Which means that the people who'll benefit aren't his only priority. And I think that's where most politicians start going wrong.'

We were on the train to London. It had been my first time out of the North East since moving up here, and I was looking forward to not being a tourist for a few days. Sonia and I had met at the station, having spent the night before separately and frantically packing, and I had just filled her in on Julian's plans for sustainable everything.

'No politician does anything just for altruism,' I said, before adding, 'It could work.'

‘Maybe,’ Sonia said. ‘But I doubt that it’ll be an easy ride for him. Doesn’t seem like local government’s being the cosy holiday he expected.’ She yawned, leaning against me. ‘Speaking of, don’t you think that *our* holiday is getting off to an odd start? I thought that you wanted to get away from the politics for a while.’

Mum had called several days before to let us know that Sonia and I had been invited to have a private tour of Parliament: an offer which had come from Uncle Andrew. We’d accepted, mainly for the novelty of the thing.

Sonia seemed to be more interested in the party. I’d never thought that anyone could look forward to meeting my family, but I guessed the novelty had worn off for me over the last twenty or so years. I wasn’t worried about how the family would take to her; whilst they could be blunt and sometimes unthinking, the Barretts and their assorted branches had always had the gift of politeness. Whatever opinion Sonia might form of my family didn’t worry me; she’d already made it clear that she was going into the meeting with a view to getting a good weekend’s worth of entertainment.

She was right. It was supposed to be a chance to get away from the bloody politics.

As we watched the confused landscape of the city fall away behind us, Sonia pulled a large, tattered novel out of her bag and, leaning back against me with a sigh, opened it. ‘Don’t move,’ she said, idly. ‘You’re extraordinarily comfy.’

‘What’s that?’ I asked, nodding at the book. ‘*How to Cope with Rich White People?*’

‘I’m going to be a lawyer, Tom,’ came her calm reply. ‘Coping with rich white people is something I’m very familiar with.’ She tilted her head back, treating me to a more-or-less upside-down view of her face as she regarded me. ‘Didn’t you bring a book? Because I’m not going to tell you a story.’

I grinned. ‘Just wanted to let you know something before you lose yourself in...’ I looked closer at the text, caught an incriminating string of words in a row, and then saw that they were a good representative of the book’s subject matter. ‘What *are* you reading, by the way?’

Sonia’s face coloured slightly. ‘I’m sure it’s none of your business.’

‘It is,’ I said, ‘when you’re using me as a cushion. Is this thing illustrated?’

That won me an amused snort. ‘You’re just a prude is all.’

‘Prudish for thinking that eight in the morning’s a little early for erotica?’

‘Yep.’ She was still engaging, but her attention had drifted back to the novel. Given what seemed to be happening on those pages, and I felt sure that I could make an

educated guess, I couldn't really blame her. 'Typical British reserve. Hiding, unless I'm very much mistaken, despicable sexual fetishes and desires.'

'You'd know if I had any of those,' I said. 'Trust me.'

'Pity,' Sonia commented. 'Now, if you don't mind, young Steven is trying to –'

'I know exactly what he's trying,' I said, cutting across her. The carriage was almost empty, for which I was at that moment extremely relieved. 'And I have to admire his optimism, the poor bastard.' I gave Sonia a kiss on the top of her head. 'Don't get too wound up, though. It's a long trip south, and it'll be separate rooms for the pair of us.'

'Oh my,' said Sonia, shifting herself against me, trying to become even more comfortable. 'However did I manage before now without my rich white person?'

The journey took just over three hours, and Sonia took a break from torrid literature to enjoy some of the snacks we'd packed with us.

'So, how do you think they'll take it?' she asked, through a mouthful of pork pie. 'You bringing a young lady to a family event? Any topics I should try to avoid?'

I shrugged. 'Maybe don't talk about any of the bestselling erotic novels. Or anything we've done along the same lines.'

She gave me a look. 'Yes, because I was absolutely planning on starting a conversation with your dear old mother by talking about how you like my legs wrapped around your waist.'

'Or on my shoulders,' I commented. 'Also, don't call my Mum "old" in front of her; she won't react well to that.'

'You really have some terrible ideas about where tact starts, don't you?' she said. 'God knows how many things I'm going to have to coach you through if you meet *my* parents.'

'I thought that wasn't on the cards.'

'Right now, it's not,' she said, though not bluntly. 'This is long-term, down-the-aisle, put-a-baby-in-me sort of planning. And Gods help us if we manage to do *that* in the wrong order.'

'Duly noted. And,' I added, 'my family should basically be fine. I mean, they'll give *me* the business about having a girlfriend. They wouldn't be relatives if they didn't. But they'll be perfectly nice to you. Just laugh at the terrible jokes and they'll be pushing for that whole down-the-aisle plan by the end of tonight.'

'Good to know. *Anyone* to avoid? Every family's got one or two.'

I gave that some thought. We certainly had some odd individuals, and probably a little odder than the average family. I had two second cousins, brother and sister, whom the rest of the family were very sure were sleeping with each other, and an aunt who could, upon request, get through a bottle of gin inside of half an hour, mixers optional. Between the lot of us, to the outside observer, we probably made the Karamazovs look like the Kardashians.

‘No-one menacing or anything like that,’ I said. ‘They’re all just more...’ I hesitated, trying to come up with the best word with which to describe my family. After a moment’s thought, I settled for ‘weird’.

‘Weird,’ Sonia repeated, as if trying the word out. Then she shrugged. ‘Okay,’ she said, palming another sausage roll. ‘Just checking. No mad racists or anything, thinking that I’m taking their jobs?’

‘They’ve never really needed jobs,’ I said, ‘so I doubt that’ll be much of an issue. They just sort of have hobbies, except for money. Less to get angry about.’

‘Ah,’ Sonia said, with a reassured air. ‘Then I’ll just make sure to laugh whenever anyone jokes and not mention our sexual escapades to any of your relatives. Easy.’

‘Easy,’ I said, far more uncertain. Sonia would, I was sure, be completely fine, and my family would take pains to put her at her ease. Me, on the other hand...I was probably going to be in for some needling. Once you were past the age of twelve, familial affection tended to show itself more and more through good-natured jibes. Living apart from them had been extremely restful. I’d not even realised how much until now, as I was heading back to them.

I pushed the thoughts out of my mind. Whatever happened, I’d been dealing with it for over ten years and I’d be able to cope for a weekend. With Sonia there, at least, there’d be at least one sane person nearby at all times.

The rest of the journey passed by quickly, and it barely seemed any time at all before the train was pulling sluggishly into King’s Cross. We left the train, passing by the long queue waiting for a photograph at Platform 9¾. Sonia demanded that we stop for a few minutes inside the Harry Potter shop alongside it, although she stopped short of actually buying a replica broomstick (‘I wouldn’t want to make the wrong impression in front of the rich white people.’). After that, we made our way out into the July sunshine, donning sunglasses as we made our way towards Euston Station.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It didn't take us long to reach Westminster from Euston, and we were soon stepping out of the underground into blazing sunshine, the Houses of Parliament dead ahead. Sonia and I headed across the road, trying to take in all the sights and at the same time not get run over.

'So, who's giving us the tour?' Sonia asked as we strode towards Big Ben.

'Civil servant,' I said, keeping an eye out for traffic. 'Former Permanent Secretary, I think Mum said. Didn't give a name.'

We showed the passes we'd been sent to the women at the visitors' entrance and were directed through the gates and through the various security checks and metal detectors which stood between the people and their public servants. From there, we followed several signs into a large, stone hall with a high timbered roof. There were groups of people gathered around there, some listening to guides whilst others were looking at large boards full of information.

As we moved inside, a short, grey-haired lady approached us, smiling pleasantly. 'Hello there,' she said, her Scottish accent pronounced enough that there might as well have been a thistle lodged behind her ear. 'Am I right in thinking that the pair of you are Sonia and Tom?'

We nodded. 'That's us.'

'Wonderful,' she said. 'Well, I'm Margaret: call me Maggie. I've worked quite closely with your uncle, Tom.'

Again, it was amazing to imagine Uncle Andrew being close to anyone, even someone he worked with almost every day. 'And Julian Ashworth?' I asked. 'I'm sort of working with him now, in Newcastle.'

'Ah yes, Andrew said that you were up in the North,' Maggie said. 'And yes, Julian was quite the character when he was around here: cheeky enough to make the day interesting, at any rate. So, ready for the grand tour of British democracy?'

We made it clear that we were, and Maggie beamed. 'Well, *this* is Westminster Hall,' she informed us, as we craned our heads to look at the ceiling. 'It was built in 1097 by order of the King: William Rufus. It was the largest hall in the world at the time: far larger than it needed to be. Although the King said that it wasn't nearly large enough, interestingly.'

Sonia muttered something which sounded suspiciously like the word 'men'.

We followed Maggie from the Hall, heading down corridors and through rooms at a brisk pace. I was surprised when we didn't stop to examine any of the artwork or, presumably, important history until our guide said over her shoulder, 'I've been chatting to some of the people who do the *official* tour, so I know everything about this place that they do, and possibly a few extras. Ah, now...'

She had led us into a large chamber, with what looked like marble busts at regular intervals. 'The Norman Porch,' she announced, looking around it with an equal amount of reverence and pride. 'When Her Majesty opens Parliament, this is where she enters the Palace.' Maggie indicated the busts. 'These are some past Prime Ministers: there's Gladstone, and just over there is Disraeli. Not quite the best of chums, so it's a little cruel that they're forever stuck in the same room.'

Sonia glanced back at the bust in question, then exchanged a quick look with me, grinning. As Maggie was talking about Charles the First's death warrant and giving the history of the stained-glass windows, I saw Sonia look at Disraeli's head again, this time sticking her tongue out at it.

'And from here,' Maggie said, eventually leading us on, 'Her Majesty comes into the Robing Room.'

We had come to a halt in a sizeable room, decorated with exquisite attention to detail. A large fireplace lay at one end, and a throne at the other, the seat threadbare. Portraits of kings and knights adorned the walls. I'd been in some fancy places before, but this topped all of them, even the bar in Newcastle with its own whisky lounge.

'The Queen gets ready here,' Maggie went on. 'Preparing herself to deliver her address in the House of Lords. Now, do you know why she addresses us all there rather than in the Commons?'

We both nodded, with Sonia saying, 'Charles the First and the Civil War.'

'Quite right,' our short Scottish guide said. 'It's fair to say that some lines were drawn then. And, somehow, we arrive at the stage where it's a politely-observed tradition, after a war and a succession crisis.' She grinned. 'British politics: we can make anything streamlined, effective and even boring.' She paused for a moment, reflecting, and then turned towards a glass case. 'And this, you may be interested in knowing, is the Magna Carta. Or, I should say, a very good copy of the Magna Carta. Wouldn't fool the black market for long...'

The tour went on, with Maggie keen to show us all the great history and ritual of Parliament. She paused almost lovingly over the marks Churchill's ring had left on the

table in the House of Lords when the man himself had pounded his fist against it and was on the verge of waxing lyrical about the paintings of Trafalgar and Waterloo in another chamber.

But it was the House of Commons which seemed to hold all her affection, even if she must spend a huge chunk of her time in or around the place on business. As Maggie took us through the history of the place, there was a sense that she was trying to represent not just the place itself, but every politician, civil servant and Lord who had ever stepped foot in the place.

Sonia ran her hand over the green leather of the benches (Maggie had warned us not to sit down, though hadn't explained why), taking in the details. 'It's an amazing place,' she said, during one of the pauses in the Highland-flavoured lecture. 'It must be strange, going to work somewhere which has had so much history happen in it?'

Maggie smiled broadly. 'I've found that to be its main appeal actually, Sonia. Sitting in a building first raised almost a millennium ago, where wars have been declared, slaves freed, a monarch sentenced to death: it really does hammer home what an incredible responsibility anyone who sits in this House is under.' She paused. 'And those who make sure they do their jobs when they need reminding, of course.'

'Not all of them seem to remember that,' I said, my time spent with Julian having made me a little more prone to speaking up.

Maggie nodded. 'Not all of them, no,' he said. 'But perhaps more than you think. I doubt too many people could stay here without a sense of some of this history weighing down on them. They're taking part in a tradition which has been going on for nearly a thousand years, and all of them realise that.'

'I suppose if I had to get stared at by Disraeli's head on my way to work every day, I'd be pretty diligent in the office,' Sonia commented. 'Well...probably not Disraeli, actually. Someone more involved in the legal side of things, if barristers get busts.'

'Ah well, they do if they were also Prime Ministers,' Maggie said, leaping on this new nugget of information. 'Ten of them were, I believe: Compton, Grenville, Pitt the Younger, Addington, Perceval, Gladstone, Asquith, Attlee, Thatcher and Blair.' She grinned at our expressions of surprise. 'Interestingly enough, Benjamin Disraeli studied at Lincoln's Inn, but never qualified. I believe someone told his father that the future Prime Minister would never make a barrister and should instead focus on a literary career.'

‘Not something you hear a lot of today,’ Sonia said, laughing. ‘Well, I suppose if I qualify then I’ll at least have something over him. I’d be very impressed if you could do that list after a couple of drinks.’

Maggie laughed loudly, throwing back her silver hair. ‘I’ll have to try that one of these days. That’d really impress the gentlemen who work here.’ She checked her watch. ‘Speaking of drinks, I believe your carriage should be getting here soon to whisk you away to that family party young Andrew’s been so looking forward to. You’re meeting whoever’s picking you up at Westminster Abbey, he told me. This way.’

Again, we followed Maggie down corridors and through halls, stopping briefly so that she could show Sonia a broken statue which a suffragette had once chained herself to. As we looked over what remained of the sculpture, I was preoccupied with my own thoughts. It was clear that Uncle Andrew had arranged this visit for more than my and Sonia’s entertainment. I didn’t know whether he was trying to remind me that there was more to politics than what you could find in Newcastle upon Tyne, or if he was worried that recent national events might have soured me on pursuing public service as a career. I didn’t know that myself; I’d not given it any thought. But it would be impossible, after seeing all of the history, the traditions and the structures of British democracy, to claim it didn’t have any appeal for me.

It was worth thinking about, though I doubt I’d have much of a chance during the party.

As Maggie drew us back towards Westminster Hall, she continued to describe the architecture and history of our surroundings. ‘There’s something I must show you just here; it won’t take a moment...oh, look who’s here!’

Both Sonia and I turned away from the tapestry she’d encouraged us to look at, following her gaze down towards the end of the corridor.

‘Oh,’ Sonia said, her tone one of flat surprise.

There was a cluster of men walking towards us, seemingly deep in conversation. There was something instantly recognisable about one of them; even from a whole corridor away it was easy to identify Jeremy Corbyn. Uncle Andrew, beside him, took a few more seconds to spot.

‘Ah, Tom,’ Uncle Andrew said, as the group approached us. ‘I was wondering whether we might run into you.’ He turned to Sonia, giving her a nod of greeting. ‘And you must be Sonia. It’s good to finally meet you. I’m Tom’s uncle: Andrew.’

‘It’s nice to meet you too,’ Sonia said, smiling brightly. ‘Tom’s mentioned you quite a lot.’

If Uncle Andrew was surprised, his face reliably offered no indication. Instead, he turned to the Leader of the Labour Party who stood beside him. ‘Allow me introduce my nephew, Tom Barrett,’ he said. ‘And his partner, Miss Sonia Malik.’

Jeremy Corbyn held out his hand and I shook it. ‘It’s nice to meet you.’

‘So, this is Amelia’s son?’ Corbyn asked, glancing at Andrew. A look passed between the two men: the kind that those who’ve met Mrs Barrett often shared. I wondered just how many people in Parliament had heard the stories.

‘That’s right,’ Uncle Andrew said. ‘He’s been up in Newcastle, working with Julian Ashworth.’

‘Ah, Julian.’ Corbyn was almost as practiced at hiding his expressions as Andrew was, though he lacked the advantage of not having his emotions buried under miles of awkward politeness. But just for a second, it was possible to see something flash across his face: someone else who knew something and who had no plans of telling me. ‘Well, I hear he’s been very dynamic up there. Good to know he’s been keeping busy.’

Sonia shifted beside me but stayed quiet. So did I; I wasn’t about to go telling stories to Julian’s boss behind his back. Besides, if they wanted to have their secrets then I could have mine too. Or Julian’s, anyway.

‘Anyway, I must be getting on,’ Corbyn said, with a glance at Uncle Andrew. ‘Plenty to get through before the weekend starts. Nice to meet the two of you; I hope to see you both again.’

We stepped aside, letting him walk on through the corridor. The three of us watched him for a moment, before Andrew turned back to the stairs, breaking the spell. ‘I’ve a few things to get done too,’ he said. ‘But I’ll see the pair of you later on. I hope Maggie’s been taking care of you.’

Maggie laughed again, shooing Uncle Andrew away with her hands as though MPs were just children constantly under civil servants’ feet. He smiled, and then turned away to follow Corbyn, leaving us a few feet from Westminster Hall.

Maggie led us back into the Hall, where other visitors were gathered in small groups. ‘Well, that’s about everything I know,’ she announced. ‘Give or take the Leader of the Labour Party. I hope it was all interesting enough.’

We assured her quite honestly that the tour had been wonderful, and she was smiling broadly as she left, telling us to enjoy that afternoon’s party. Sonia and I

stepped out into bright sunshine, shielding our eyes from its glare. From there, we walked hand-in-hand towards Westminster Abbey, waiting together in a thoughtful silence.

‘Well, that’s something that doesn’t happen every day,’ Sonia said, eventually. ‘Not in Newcastle, anyway. You probably trip over Party Leaders in London.’

‘It was pretty surprising,’ I agreed. It had also, I was thinking, been a pretty big coincidence to run into both a family member and the Leader of Her Majesty’s Most Loyal Opposition. Or at least it seemed that way, until you remembered that Uncle Andrew had been the one to arrange this tour for us in the first place. I was quite sure that the meeting had been by design rather than happenstance. What I wasn’t certain of was why.

Before I could mention this to Sonia, a black car pulled up nearby with a honk of the horn, the driver waving enthusiastically to us both through the window. I smiled, waving back.

‘Dad’s here,’ I said, nodding to the car.

Sonia looked up, a little startled, and then nodded. ‘Oh great,’ she said, in a determinedly calm voice. ‘More family members.’ She gave Dad, who had gotten out of the car and who was walking towards us, a cheerful smile with just a hint of trepidation. I squeezed her hand, and we both headed for the car and the next stage of an already-strange holiday.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The drive from Westminster to Chelsea took far longer than, I imagined, literally any other form of transport would have done, but Dad's car was comfy and, despite his awkwardness when it came to expressing paternal affection, he was a good enough conversationalist that we weren't faced with any protracted silences.

When we finally did arrive at Uncle Andrew's house, I had to actually prod Sonia into opening the door on her side. She climbed out by herself, but the quietness she'd lapsed into in the closing moments of the drive had now matured into a strained sort of silence. I thought about reaching for her hand again to give it another squeeze, but that had seemed like the kind of trick which only worked once. Instead, I placed a hand on the small of her back, giving her a gentle yet encouraging push towards the large black door.

Dad overtook us, pulling both of our cases along with him, and gave the old brass knocker a sharp couple of raps. Before I could drag my thoughts away from Sonia and onto the chaos that lay beyond the door, it was pushed open and the noise and warmth from inside hit us like we'd just stepped off a plane in the Bahamas.

We stepped into the hallway, and our arrival was immediately noticed by a number of relatives who, it seemed, had been gathered there for the sole purpose of raising their voices and their glasses in greeting.

For a few seconds, Sonia went entirely disregarded as I was surrounded by aunts, uncles and second cousins, all of whom seemed astonished that I'd managed to return from the North alive and in one piece. I was asked a great many questions, all of which hit me at roughly the same time and which all seemed to be along the general theme of whether I was still sensible enough to wear a coat in the winter 'unlike those Geordies, going out in December wearing t-shirts and miniskirts like they think they're in Barbados'.

Dad seemed content to smile and let it all happen, probably grateful that this sort of scene no longer happened to him. Sonia had started smiling faintly too, although the expression became a lot brighter and a great deal more fixed as my relatives suddenly turned their attention to her with the intensity of a small sun.

I can only assume that a law degree and a lifetime of lying to her parents had done some part in preparing her for that moment; she dealt with it extremely well. Questions

were answered diplomatically, pleasantries were exchanged, social faux-pas (my family's) overlooked and jokes laughed at with authentic heartiness.

We were both almost dragged into the lounge, and then passed around the assembled groups and individuals in order to meet with the approval of each and every present branch of the family tree. Once again, my return from the wild and lawless streets of Newcastle (it seemed to have come a surprise to some of my relatives that there was any civilisation between Manchester and Edinburgh) was elevated to some kind of mythic endeavour.

My actual work in the political sphere of Newcastle upon Tyne was mostly unexplored, despite most of the family understanding that it was something that I was doing 'instead of getting on with a proper job'. Sonia, on the other hand, got off remarkably easily; my relations thoroughly approved of having another lawyer in the world (a sentiment most definitely shared by the several of them who were, in fact, lawyers).

The main topic of conversation, unsurprisingly, was Brexit. The family, all were extremely keen to inform me, had overwhelmingly voted Remain and were loudly and tipsily outraged at what the nation had voted to do with itself. Sonia and I were keenly interrogated on our own vote before being decisively decried for living in a region which had, in the words of one particularly gin-saturated aunt 'toppled a once-proud nation from its place on the world's stage and consigning it to the slag-heap of history'.

There hadn't been any response to that other than to offer to refill her glass: a proposal which quite derailed her ongoing narrative. Whilst I'd not been there to witness my family's reaction to the referendum first-hand, I'd have bet that they'd not had much of a change of heart since then, if they'd reflected upon it at all. They'd probably not got to be where they were today by reflecting. As far as they were concerned, the country was going to be wrecked by shifty politicians and people who'd had no business voting in the first place if they weren't going to take the time to understand the political, economic and social repercussions of either choice. Would I be feeling the same way if I'd not gone to Newcastle? Probably. Would I be any happier, being able to take comfort in the absolute knowledge that I was on the right side of history?

Well, Sonia had told me that ignorance was bliss.

It was a positive relief to finally catch sight of Uncle Andrew, who had managed to find himself a handy wall to lean against and a glass of something alcoholic to hold.



He raised his eyebrows in greeting when there was a bit of breathing space between relatives, although the tide of mostly-identical members of my mother's family was still too thick to try and wade through to reach him. We'd have a chance to speak later.

An even greater relief was delivered just a few minutes later, when Jenny and Rita made their grand entrance to the party. They'd probably not intended it to *be* grand, but they'd not had a chance at discretion once their presence was noted, hailed, and stampeded towards.

Sonia and I took advantage of the opportunity, half-filling two glasses with red wine and both taking long drinks.

'Wow,' she said, rubbing at her teeth to remove any stains. 'I guess you did warn me.'

'I know,' I replied, the wine's sharpness taking me by surprise. This had been, I realised, my first drink following the referendum. The news, which I'd been increasingly glued to, had been so depressing that I hadn't thought alcohol would help. The lack of hangovers had also been a bonus; I don't think I'd have had much patience with Julian if I'd had one.

'Still,' I said, 'they like you. In case you were wondering.'

'Suppose it might be useful,' Sonia conceded, trying her best to appear casual. 'You seem like a well-connected family. Know any lawyers?'

'Far too many. Oops, drink up: it's round two.'

We took another hasty sip of the wine. Sonia didn't wipe her teeth this time, presumably succumbing to an awareness that we were probably going to get good and hammered by the end of today, whether we'd planned on it or not.

Jenny and Rita were practically borne into the room by a wave of Barretts, Crofts, Lockwoods, Caldwells and many other good, old-fashioned English names. I was, in fact, just about square on the surnames my large family was made up from; the Christian names were all a jumble in my head, made all the more confusing by the fact that you could throw a rock at one of our gatherings and be almost certain to score a glancing hit off a Godfrey. I usually compensated for this massive blind spot by getting noticeably tipsy early on at these events, and so had earned a reputation as a casual drunkard rather than someone who couldn't remember their very own, much-beloved second cousin thrice removed.

After being passed around like new inmates at a prison, Jenny and Rita were at last permitted to make the hurried walk to the table piled high with alcohols.

‘Tom,’ Jenny said, looking as though she’d just boarded the *Titanic*’s last lifeboat. ‘Wine. Red. Please.’

‘Alright, Tom?’ Rita grinned, giving me a quick peck on the cheek. Rita had adjusted to becoming a part of these family events with, I thought, extremely good grace. She seemed to regard the whole affair as a kind of surreal, long-running joke that, she was sure, someone would eventually let her in on. Presumably at the wedding, I thought.

I handed Jenny a glass brimming with Cabernet Sauvignon, and she practically inhaled it. ‘God, I don’t know why I agreed to this,’ she said, once she’d gotten her breath back. ‘I think I’d prefer it if they’d exiled me.’

‘They like me too much,’ Rita said. ‘Should have lost your heart to someone boring.’

‘It’s a tempting offer,’ Jenny said, punching her fiancé lightly on the shoulder. ‘Anyway,’ she added, switching her attention back to me, ‘where the fuck have you been? Your Mum said something about you being *up North*.’ She managed a credible impersonation of one Mrs Barrett on the last couple of words, enough so that Sonia choked on some of her wine, coughing desperately. I gave her a slap on the back, and she managed to swallow.

‘Thanks,’ she said, taking another sip. Jenny and Rita were watching her, weighing her up with a calculating gaze. Sonia noticed the looks and offered her hand. ‘Sonia Malik,’ she said. ‘Tom’s lady friend.’

Jenny did a rather enthusiastic double-take. ‘Fucking hell,’ she said, grinning. ‘Uncle Mike owes me tenner. No offence, Tom, but there was some talk about how unlikely you ever getting a steady girlfriend was.’

‘Ah,’ Sonia said, starting to smile as well. ‘Misspent youth? Sex maniac? Something you’ve been keeping back from me, Tom?’

‘More that he thought he batted for the other side,’ Jenny stated, apparently quite at ease with embarrassing me in front of my girlfriend. ‘Never seemed to be interested in women, to tell you the truth.’

‘That was more bad luck than anything else,’ I said, extremely keen to switch topics to practically anything else. ‘Sonia, this is Jenny and Rita.’

‘Congratulations,’ Sonia said.

‘Thanks,’ Rita said. ‘And to you too. How did you get together? Is there a story behind that?’

I glanced at Sonia. There was, really, but I wasn't that thrilled with the idea of either Jenny or Rita hearing about how we'd depressed-fucked our way into a relationship.

I settled for saying, 'Brexit.'

Jenny and Rita exchanged a glance. 'Beats ours,' Rita said, after a moment. 'We just met at a stand-up comedy show.'

Jenny nodded. 'Less complicated,' she said. 'Less "screw up the whole country" too, I suppose. Still, I'm sure it's not some kind of omen.'

'Good of you to say,' I replied, rolling my eyes and taking a drink. 'We thought introducing Sonia here would be easier; we figured that you'd already be here, stealing focus. Not every day our family gets to brag about having a lesbian wedding.'

Rita laughed. 'True progressives. And,' she nodded to Sonia as well, 'if you two tie the knot, that's something else for them to feel noble about.'

'Not too noble,' I said. 'She wants to be a lawyer.'

There was a laugh from Jenny, who'd managed to refill her glass and get a good way through draining it. 'Even better,' she said, raising the half-empty vessel in mock salute. 'She's practically white, straight and male.'

\* \* \*

The party went on late into the night. The Barrett family and supporting artists weren't always able to gather in such large numbers, and we liked to take full advantage of it. Those who lived nearby would return to their homes and show up the next day for a lavish lunch; for those who'd come from further afield, there was no shortage of rooms.

Sonia and I were informed, during one brief moment of peace, that we were to be staying in two separate bedrooms. I was to keep two of my younger cousins company during the night, whereas Sonia, being a guest, had a small room to herself.

'No chance you could *Mission Impossible* your way over here tonight?' she asked, looking around her quarters for the night. 'It'd be a bit weird, staying in a place like this without anyone around.'

'That's a little risky,' I said. 'My family seems to think that there's only sex inside of a marriage. I wasn't planning on opening their eyes to a whole new world tonight.'

Sonia blew a raspberry. 'Like hell they think that,' she said. 'Most of them know first-hand...' she paused, as if to savour the pun, 'that there's sex outside of marriage.'

'They don't know I'm having it,' I countered.'

'Tom, I hate to break it to you, but they probably do.'

I gave it some thought. 'Alright, probably,' I admitted. 'But I'd rather not give them absolute proof.'

She shrugged. 'So don't get caught. I promise not to knock the walls down or sing an aria.'

I weighed it up. The idea of spending a night apart from Sonia whilst under the same (admittedly vast) roof wasn't a great one. On the other hand, there was a fair way between my shared bedroom and her single one. There were a lot of doors which could open at a dramatic moment. A lot of grey and bushy eyebrows which could, in no uncertain terms, be raised. Most of all, there were a lot of truly terrible and galling jokes which could be made at my expense over breakfast.

Finally, I said, 'Try and stay awake; I'll see what I can do.'

Grinning, Sonia gave me a kiss on the cheek. 'If you're caught, at least they'll know you don't bat for the other side.'

'Thanks,' I said, giving her a kiss back. 'That really helps.'

The rest of the day had been something of a blur, and one which had gotten slightly off-balance at around four o'clock. We took a break then, joining Jenny and Rita in the spacious back garden, although declining the offer of a cigarette. Nobody knew that they smoked apart from me, although I had a sneaking suspicion that even this secret wasn't safe from Mrs Barrett and her great omniscience.

The fresh, still-warm air had helped us to recover a little of our sense, something which was aided by the delicious buffet we were served at five. Thankfully, most of the family were in a similar if not worse state than we were and were all too shaky on their own names to check if I knew them. I didn't even get asked just what I intended to do with myself, which I regarded as a definite plus.

Sonia they seemed to have adopted wholeheartedly. One particularly soused uncle was certain that she was his own great niece, although quite where she'd gotten that lovely suntan he couldn't imagine.

Once we'd piled several plates high and subsequently emptied them (whoever had organised the party had definitely accounted for the boundless appetite of your average drunk), I noticed that there was a grey presence hovering around me.

I turned and saw Uncle Andrew standing almost apologetically in front of me. He didn't seem in the least bit affected by any drink, even though I'd covertly watched him match Uncle Godfrey wine for wine.

'Tom,' he said, in a quiet, steady voice. 'Would you mind if I had a quick word?'

I hesitated and then stood, managing to do so without overbalancing or headbutting my uncle in the chin. Uncle Andrew's eyes moved over to Sonia, who was doing her best to look politely and, more importantly, soberly interested. She just about managed interested.

'Sonia,' he said, 'you're welcome to come too. I hear that you work at the council.'

'Sort of,' she said, also rising. 'Kind of like a stepping stone to becoming a lawyer. If I become a lawyer.'

'I'm sure you will,' Uncle Andrew said, starting to lead us out of the room. 'Julian has spoken...very highly of you.'

He must be at least a little drunk, I thought. Otherwise that hesitation, if present, would never have been noticeable. Sonia had heard it too, and she shot me a glance. I shrugged, not trusting myself to speak quietly enough to discuss it.

We were led through several hallways, ensuring that I'd never find my way back to the party the first time, until we reached a study. It was a classy place: oak bookshelves; green leather on the chairs and desk, and a bottle of Penderyn on the desk. There were also three glasses next to it. I didn't comment, although my eyes might have been drawn to the bottle ever so slightly.

'Do you have any taste for whisky, Sonia?' Uncle Andrew asked.

Sonia seemed to wrestle with herself for a moment, and then gave in, nodding. 'I quite like it, yes.'

Uncle Andrew poured a double into each glass, and then passed one to each of us. I took mine and, a little uncertainly, sank down into one of the chairs. It was firm and not quite comfortable, but it was a smaller risk than remaining upright. Sonia followed suit, but Uncle Andrew leaned back against the desk, resting his weight against it. It was amazing, I thought, how he could make such a casual movement seem so affected.

He raised his glass in a salute, the motion reflecting the one Jenny had made earlier. He didn't say what we were drinking to, but we drank anyway.

After that, he remained silent for a while. Neither Sonia nor I asked what he'd wanted to talk about, or why he seemed not to want to talk about it now. The last time I'd been in this situation, I'd ended up meeting a Shadow Chancellor. For all I knew, he was about to offer me a seat in Parliament.

Finally, he broke the silence. 'I take it you're aware that Britain has voted to leave the European Union.'

If anyone else had asked me that, I'd have probably left, then probably come back later to pinch the rest of their whisky. But I was becoming more familiar with Uncle Andrew's mannerisms, one of which was the well-meaning assumption that everyone he spoke to was severely uninformed or behind the times. If he'd been around during the Blitz, you'd have found him sitting in an air raid shelter, inquiring whether the person next to him was aware that Germany had marched into Poland.

'Yes,' I said, as seriously as I could.

'Yes,' Sonia said, somewhat more seriously.

'I see,' Uncle Andrew said, clearly viewing this as his starting point. 'And...can I assume that you've noticed that Julian has become a little more...' he strove for the right word and apparently was willing to settle for, 'tense?'

Sonia didn't reply. She was too busy looking at me.

'Yes,' I said. It was, after all, indisputably true. 'He's been a bit...' My turn to play the adjective game '...unpredictable?' Close enough.

Sonia coughed. I ignored it.

Uncle Andrew had heard the cough, and his eyes had moved over to her again, just for a moment. Then he seemed to divide his attention between the two of us once more and went on.

'Jeremy...well, he's a little worried. I know that Julian's not Shadow Chancellor anymore, but the reason he wanted this position, and was willing to settle for it, was because he thought that there was something that he could salvage from the situation. Well,' he sighed, and took another drink, 'that's all over.'

'What do you mean?' I asked, sitting up a little straighter in my chair.

'What I mean,' Uncle Andrew said, 'is that devolution – what was meant to be his big project – is off the table. Everything that could have been done: none of it is going to happen now. He's going to be the leader of the city council, for a while, and nothing else.'

I looked at my uncle, already feeling more sober. What he was saying was at odds with Julian's attitude right now; it didn't line up with the energy that he'd been demonstrating, nor the plans he'd been detailing to me earlier. If that was the case, then what Julian had told me wasn't something he'd run past Uncle Andrew or Corbyn. I wondered what might have been going on between the three of them.

I was also a little unnerved by the use of the phrase 'for a while'. It seemed like Andrew was expecting Julian to take a walk soon enough, or else be told to take one.

What would happen to me then? I was still tied to Julian, as my move to Newcastle had ensured. What was I supposed to do if Julian were to find himself out in the cold? Come back here, leaving Sonia? Find some sort of job in Newcastle? I couldn't very well hang around the council without him.

'I know that you and Julian have become close, Tom,' my uncle said. His voice seemed to come from a long way away, and I forced myself back into the moment, away from a universe of hypotheticals. 'I don't want to alarm you. But I don't know how long he's going to want to stay in a position where he feels impotent. I'm sure you realise, it's not Julian's way.'

'He's your friend,' I said, looking at him. 'Yours and Corbyn's. Can't you...help him?'

Uncle Andrew sighed. 'Tom...this is how we think we *can* best help him. It isn't just the referendum and our break from the EU that's brought this on; if it was, then we wouldn't be talking about this. Julian...' there was another pause, and this time he took a large drink of the whisky, apparently wearing down the difficulty of what he was going to say next. 'Julian is my friend. I care about him very much, and I want the best for him. But Julian was never going to be happy as a leader of the city council. He'd never be happy unless he was able to accomplish something. If he'd remained Shadow Chancellor, I believe he'd have reached that point eventually anyway. Julian wants to be working; he wants everything moving and for there to be constant progress. Not for any feeling of personal glory or so that it will advance his career. Julian wants to achieve and do the best job he possibly can because *that's what Julian Ashworth does.*'

The last half of that sentence had been delivered with an emotion that I'd never heard from Uncle Andrew before. Mostly because it was actually emotion.

'Julian has always excelled,' Uncle Andrew went on, in a more controlled voice. 'He's mostly found it easy, and when he hasn't he's worked as hard as he could to overcome it. But politics isn't school or university; it's not something you can throw yourself into and expect results which reflect that. I've met men and women who'd be excellent Prime Ministers, but who'll never even step inside Parliament. I know plenty more who would give anything to be Prime Minister, and some of them might one day be just that, even if they would do a terrible job.' Another sip of whisky. 'I'll never be Prime Minister, Tom. People don't like me. I get along with several people, and we enjoy each other's company, but I could never get people excited about possibilities

like Jeremy can, or like Julian. I do what I can, and I'd like to think that I do rather a good job, because I care about my party and, more than that, I care about the country.'

'And Julian?' I hadn't said this; it was Sonia who had asked, sitting forward somewhat, her hand gripping her whisky glass.

'Julian wants to do the most he can,' Uncle Andrew said, simply. 'He wants to help people: that's why he got into politics. But his drive comes from doing what he considers to be the best possible job.' Uncle Andrew shrugged. 'It might be for the best. Politics isn't really the place for nobility. It hasn't been for quite some time. Disraeli and Trollope can write about their heroic politicians, but they'd be eaten alive in Westminster today. They'd never be allowed to stand for a seat, although they might win one somewhere. Julian knows this; he's too intelligent not to. His problem is that he thinks of rules and conventions as a barrier to what he's doing: something that he can step around or find a loophole because what he's trying to do matters more. But it's not going to work this time: there'll be no devolution. No Mayor of the North East. And as he has to accept his situation, he'll get more despondent and, I think, more erratic.' He coughed, something which seemed to have more to do with awkwardness on his part than any reaction to the whisky he was sipping.

I thought about this with as much sobriety as I could manage. I remembered the day that Gateshead had turned its back on devolution, and the time Julian had spent in his study, drinking and brooding. It fit with what my uncle was saying. It fit extremely well.

What it didn't fit with was Julian's new plan. And I knew then that Julian couldn't have talked to him about it; he might not have told anyone except me. When was he planning to let them in on it? Over the next few weeks, or with everyone else when he announced his plans to whatever papers would show up?

'So...' I was playing for time now, keeping my eyes on Uncle Andrew as I agonised over whether or not to say anything, 'what are you going to do?'

'Nothing, at present,' Uncle Andrew replied. 'It's a matter of seeing how everything stands. If we do need to have a...a quiet word, then we'd like to do so with as much tact as possible. No hurt feelings. No burned bridges. Hopefully, it'll be the best thing for everyone.'

'Tell him, Tom.' This was Sonia; she'd turned to look at me and was looking more serious than she had all day.



Andrew said nothing, but his eyebrows raised themselves into an appearance of polite inquiry as he waited.

Irritation shot through me. Sonia had taken charge of the matter, making the decision to inform on Julian without any discussion between us. And even if I'd resolved to tell Uncle Andrew for my own reasons, it was hard not to see this as the latest shot fired between my mentor and my girlfriend, and even harder not to think of it as selfish and petty.

But no matter what it might be, I was now facing the questioning gaze of my uncle. I couldn't lie to him – not with Sonia sitting right next me – and I didn't feel comfortable staying silent after she'd backed me into this corner.

'Julian...' I started, and then broke off, trying to find the best way to say it whilst still being honest. 'He's got an idea. Some kind of new housing scheme: for social workers, nurses, cops. Sustainable housing, with renewable energy and made out of sustainable materials. He was telling me about it a few days ago.' I sighed. 'He's been dealing with things a little better than you and Corbyn might think. I think it's because of this idea.'

Uncle Andrew's forehead wrinkled faintly with a frown. 'It would certainly have made sense before, when devolution was a possibility. But now? Where does he think he's going to get the money from? He'll be working with an even more restricted budget than he has presently.'

I paused again, but now that I'd started it was a little easier to keep going. 'It's going to be a tax on the sale of houses above a certain figure: three hundred and fifty thousand or so. He thinks that it would be enough, and that it wouldn't hurt Labour's votes at the end of it.'

Uncle Andrew sat still for a while, eyes on me but clearly looking at something else. Eventually, he asked, 'And you know this because he told you?'

I nodded.

'Who else in the council knows?'

'I've no idea. Sonia knows because I told her. He might have talked about it to other people; he might not have mentioned it. I really don't know.'

Again, there was silence. I didn't know what Uncle Andrew was thinking over. It was too late in too alcoholic a day for me to guess.

It was a shorter pause than the first. Whatever Uncle Andrew had been working on, he didn't tell us. Instead, he gave a sigh of his own, shaking his head as though to

dislodge his thoughts. 'Thank you for telling me this, Tom. For now, as I've said, we'll just have to hope that Julian is going to be sensible.'

'Do you think he will?' Sonia asked. Her voice carried a trace of scepticism that, even on the south side of tipsy, I could hear.

'He might,' my uncle said. 'Jeremy and I hope that he can. What we want most of all is for him not to damage himself; that's what we've been trying to avoid for a while now. If it would be better for him to step away from his responsibilities, then it's important that he does so. Unfortunately,' he added, with a wry glance at me, 'it seems as though he might not agree with us.'

I nodded. For what it was worth, I believed Uncle Andrew. I certainly didn't think that he was lying to me. Not from any affection or loyalty, although I was sure that we both had a little of both for each other. But rather because, in the most banal terms, there was no reason for him to tell anything but the truth.

One thing, however, was bothering me.

'Why are you telling me this?' I asked. 'I understand what you're saying, but I don't know why you're letting me know. Do...do you want me to do something?'

Uncle Andrew, for the first time since I'd met him, looked surprised. It was the most animated I'd ever seen his facial expression.

'Well...I'm telling you this, Tom, because I care about my older sister very much. And because I care about you. And I certainly don't, no matter what happens in the near future, want you to go through anything negative because of it. Do you see?'

I was touched. That was probably as close to an unprompted 'I love you' that I would ever get from Uncle Andrew.

I nodded again. 'Okay. Then...thanks. Sorry for asking.'

Uncle Andrew waved a hand. 'I understand completely. And I see that you understand a little more of politics than you did.'

I forced a smile. 'Maybe just a bit.'

My uncle nodded vaguely, in a way which made clear that it wasn't directed at either me or Sonia; it was just a nod. For a moment, he looked extremely morose.

'There is something,' he said, his voice making clear that he wished that there wasn't. 'With Julian so far away, any news or problems would reach us more slowly than we'd like. I...' He stopped, took another sip of his whisky, and went on, 'We would very much appreciate it if you would be able to...well, I suppose keep an eye on him.'

I stared down at my own drink, barely surprised at this point. ‘You want me to spy on him?’

‘Not spy,’ he said, quickly. ‘Nothing like that. Just if there was anything in his behaviour that you thought of as out of the ordinary, or strange. It would be extremely helpful if you could let me know: both for me and for Julian. I wouldn’t ask for you to do anything that would do him any harm; this is exactly the opposite.’

‘I don’t get it,’ I said. ‘I mean...even if the policy thing’s not going to work, why is it such a big worry? It’s local government; people aren’t going to pay much attention if something doesn’t get off the ground there, are they? And if it doesn’t, then that might make Julian walk away too. How much could it really affect him?’

For a while, it seemed that Uncle Andrew was considering both me and Sonia. Neither of us spoke, both curious as to what he was going to say next. There was an ominous sense to his scrutiny, as though what we might next hear would not be imparted lightly.

‘You know why Julian went to Newcastle, Tom,’ Uncle Andrew said, his voice quieter than it had been.

I nodded. ‘Devolution. Mayor of the North East.’

‘But he’s never told you why he left the Shadow Cabinet for local government. Even for that position, it must have seemed like a gamble to you.’

Again, I nodded. ‘You didn’t tell me, so it seemed like I shouldn’t ask.’

‘And that was probably for the best,’ Uncle Andrew said, taking another drink of Penderyn. ‘But...if it helps you understand the situation a little better...’ He opened his mouth to go on, closed it, and then threw back the rest of his whisky in a single, smooth motion. Then he said: ‘Julian punched the Chief Whip in the face during a disagreement.’

Now my mouth was open. I heard a sound from Sonia, which might have been a cough or possibly a gasp. I wanted to say that I couldn’t believe it, but I could. Julian was passionate: it was one of the first words you’d think of to describe him. Picturing him laying someone out wasn’t only possible: it was easy. I was just amazed that he’d actually done something so...stupid. One punch and his parliamentary career had evaporated: an otherwise-intelligent man throwing everything away for a brief release of his temper.

I shook my head slowly. I'd never punched anyone. It hadn't ever been a requirement. It was hard to imagine a situation where it would seem like the smart thing to do. I doubted it had been in Julian's case.

'Neither of them was acting particularly maturely,' Uncle Andrew went on, his tone of voice making it clear that the details of this incident had been gone over several times. 'And when Sam – the Chief Whip – grabbed hold of Julian to stop him from walking off...' He shrugged, the conclusion obvious.

I was still trying to get a handle on this; in a few sentences my perception of the man I'd been working with for more than half a year had completely changed. I didn't know how I'd view him once I was in Newcastle again. It was almost enough to make me not want to go back at all.

I glanced out of the corner of my eye at Sonia, catching her head finish turning back to face my uncle. I looked at him too. His expression was a mixture of unhappiness and scrutiny. God knew what she was thinking.

'We were able to protect him from the media,' my uncle was saying. 'Barely anyone knows that it happened: only those who have to. And, now, the two of you. It goes without saying that I'd like you not to tell anyone else about this.'

We nodded. That was understandable.

'Devolution, the North East...' Uncle Andrew sighed. 'It all seemed to fit into place. It was a way for Julian to be out of the public eye. It was a way we could have one of our people keeping an eye on things and how we could stop the Conservatives from putting one of their own in the Mayor's seat. And it was a way that Julian, eventually, could come back to us. It was all going to work out, but...' He shook his head, the silence presumably supposed to encompass the past six months. After a moment, he looked at me. 'I suppose you understand now why I arranged for you to have the tour today.'

I did, or at least I thought I could guess. Julian, at least to his mind, was practically a prisoner in Newcastle at this point. Uncle Andrew probably wanted to make sure that he didn't have me feeling the same way. For one of us, at least, there was still national politics.

'And I hope, Tom, that you can appreciate why I'd like to be kept... "in the loop" about any developments,' he went on.

I was gazing into my glass, still trying to make sense of the last minute. I'd told Julian's plans to the man he'd been keeping them from: a man who'd just told me one

of Julian's secrets in return, and who was now charging me with keeping watch on him like he was under police surveillance.

All I'd really wanted was to have a weekend away from sodding politics.

Finally, slowly, I nodded. If what he'd said was true, then this was for Julian more than it was against him. That I could just about live with, even if I was still having trouble accepting any of it.

'Okay,' I said. 'I'll do it. As long as this *is* about helping him.'

I hadn't known whether that would be pushing it too far or not before saying it, but all Uncle Andrew did was nod enthusiastically. 'It is,' he said, reassuringly. 'It most definitely is.' Then his face smoothed itself out into that blank, politely helpful expression which was so familiar to me. He raised the bottle from the desk, giving it a little shake. 'Shall we have another before we go back to the family?'

\* \* \*

It was later. Quite a lot of the family had gone home with a headache. The rest of us were going to stay here, also with headaches. Tomorrow, we would meet up and do much the same thing again, with considerably bigger headaches. It was the same old story.

Sonia had been a little quiet during the rest of the party, at least when we were alone. With my family, she had been cheerful, responsive and interested, but in the short spaces of quiet between being accosted by yet another aunt, I saw her looking pensive and, on occasion, glancing quickly at me before turning back to her drink.

By some unspoken agreement, we'd not discussed what had been disclosed over Welsh whisky. I still felt some twinge of annoyance when I thought about her thrusting what I'd started thinking of as Julian's secrets out in the open and didn't quite trust myself to talk about it rationally with her. The other half of it, of course, was knowing why Julian had gone to Newcastle in the first place. The knowledge, for me, was still too raw and uncomfortable to speak openly about, and I wasn't quite ready for Sonia's reaction to it; I knew her well enough to expect a hint of satisfaction that Julian had done something so rash.

We'd said goodnight at twelve, finding a quiet corner to share a few long kisses. We'd been interrupted by three of my younger cousins, two of whom (boys) had made exaggerated noises of both disgust and vomiting, and one (girl) who'd seemed happy to stay and watch if we started up again. Smiling ruefully at each other, we had

separated with a quick peck on the lips, which seemed to disappoint all three members of our undersized audience, and had gone off to find our rooms.

The two boys who had borne witness to ‘The Snogging’ were sharing a room with me, and a combination of sugar and an oppressed class’s stubborn resistance to authority would have made getting the pair of them to go to bed a real chore even if I’d been sober. As it was, I finally resorted to threatening to bring my mother into the equation if they didn’t settle down. That, amusingly enough, did the trick. It was nice to know that the threat of Mrs Barrett was as effective as ever, if possibly a violation of the Geneva Convention.

I waited first until I could hear the sounds of impossibly loud snoring fade into a more authentic variation, and then until there seemed to be no sound at all from elsewhere in the house before I made my move. This was going to be a risky operation; getting caught would result in yet more opportunities for my family to make jokes about me being in a respectable romantic relationship, which I was keen to avoid.

I got out of bed, pulling on a dressing gown. Tom Barrett’s first rule of sneaking around: don’t do so bollock naked. Then I pushed open the door as quietly as I could, hoping that the sound wouldn’t rouse either of the cousins. The idea of threatening them with a visit from my mother at one in the morning wouldn’t do much good: not when they knew that whoever woke her up would be short an arm on the return journey.

Door successfully negotiated, I slipped out into the corridor, closing it silently behind me. Step three: try to remember where in the hell Sonia’s room was. This took a while, and I was fortunately too cautious to try any of the doors before I was absolutely sure. It wasn’t going to do anything for my heterosexual reputation if I accidentally managed to slide nude into the bed next to Uncle Godfrey.

Finally, I found what I believed to be the door, and debated the wisdom of giving it a soft knock. On the one hand, it would definitely confirm that this was, in fact, the right room. On the other hand, if it wasn’t then I’d have just drawn attention to my presence and, most likely, my intentions.

I gave a knock, on the basis that I could always say that I was sleepwalking if I was wrong. For a tense moment, I heard the sounds of someone moving around and prepared myself to theatrically jerk awake.

The door opened, and Sonia was smiling at me. ‘Well well well,’ she said. ‘Looks like someone snuck out successfully.’

‘Someone did,’ I said, returning the smile. ‘And someone would rather not get caught, if it’s all the same to you.’

‘Wuss,’ she replied, but stepped aside, letting me into the room. I let the robe drop as I moved inside, and Sonia laughed. ‘Someone’s keen,’ she said, looking me up and down. ‘Perfect.’

She stepped forward, letting me place my arms around her, and our lips were pressed against each other. She was wearing thick pyjama trousers and a pale pink t-shirt, and she quickly pulled the top off and over her head. My mouth moved from her lips to her neck, and when my teeth closed on her skin she gave a moan.

‘Shh,’ I whispered, kissing the spot.

‘What?’ she asked, running her hands over my chest. ‘You think your mother’s outside, listening?’

Then there was a soft knock against the door.

Both of us froze for a second, and then parted slightly to stare at each other. So, it was true: my mother knew all things at all times. I’d had plenty of evidence and yet had chosen to ignore it.

We stayed still and silent, willing for the knocker to assume that Sonia was fast asleep and fully clothed, and to go back to bed.

There was a second knock, barely perceptibly louder, and then a quiet voice, coming from lower down than I’d been expecting.

‘Sonia. Are you awake?’ It was a child’s voice: a girl’s. The voice was trying both to attract the right kind of attention and desperately avoid any other kind.

Sonia and I exchanged quizzical glances, and she nodded towards the door. I sighed, then dropped down to the floor. Snagging my abandoned robe en route, I rolled underneath Sonia’s borrowed bed and tugged the duvet slightly so as to provide better cover.

I heard Sonia slip her t-shirt on over her head, walk over to the door, and pull it open.

‘Anastasia,’ she said, keeping her voice a little above a whisper. ‘It’s late. What’s the matter?’

Anastasia’s voice was quieter than Sonia’s: quiet enough that I wasn’t able to make out any of the words. I heard her murmur for a moment, and then fall silent.

‘A monster?’ Sonia asked, and I could hear the faint amusement in her voice as she repeated the words, presumably for my benefit. ‘I see. Well...do you want me to come and look for it? I’m not afraid of monsters.’

More murmuring, this time sounding quite a bit more urgent. I heard Sonia sigh. ‘Yes, I suppose that does make sense,’ she said: a lawyer backed into an avenue of logic that they know is entirely fraudulent but forced to reason their way through it regardless. ‘So, what should we do, Ana?’

Murmur whisper murmur.

‘Alright,’ Sonia said, and now I could hear the ripple of laughter running under her reply. ‘But you’ll need to try and go to sleep right away, okay? We’ve all got to be wide awake for breakfast tomorrow.’

Murmur.

‘Okay. Come on in.’

Two pairs of feet crossed the floor, and I heard the sound of someone climbing onto the bed above me. No creaks or sags from the mattress: probably some kind of memory foam. Might have made for an extremely pleasant time of it, but I should have known better than to assume my family would let me get away with something like that.

Sonia’s feet were in front of my face now as she sat down on the bed too, fussing around Anastasia in a kind but firm manner. She’d lowered her voice, but I could still catch the occasional word: various deductive and empirical arguments against the existence of monsters, urging Ana to trust in established knowledge and research rather than worrying about what, demonstrably, was not in fact there.

I wasn’t sure whether little Ana was any more convinced, but Sonia’s soothing lecture did seem to do a good job of lulling her off to sleep, which might have been her intention the whole time.

Finally, just when my own eyes were starting to close of their own accord, Sonia’s hand lowered itself into view, a thumb extending from a clenched fist. As quietly as I could, I rolled out from under the bed, lying on my back to see her grinning down at me.

‘Eek,’ she whispered. ‘A monster.’

‘Don’t you start,’ I muttered, climbing silently back up to my feet and pulling on my robe. ‘Trust my family. Mum’s probably in her room right now, in a monster costume, satisfied that her plan worked.’



Sonia nodded. ‘Almost certainly.’ She gave me a quick kiss, squeezing my shoulder in a conciliatory fashion. ‘Now, off to bed with you too. Sorry this didn’t work out.’

I moved over to the door which Sonia had had the forethought not to click shut. With a last look back and a roll of the eyes, I stepped back out into the corridor, rather more sober than I had been and considerably pissed off. Any monsters which I happened to encounter along the way were going to have a very bad time of it.

I reached my room without any incident, the route I’d chosen being quite monster-free. As I pushed the door open, I happened to lock eyes with a rather grand portrait of a rather old man. He was wearing some kind of red military outfit, adorned with far too many medals and with a look of stern displeasure on his face which might as well have been called ‘The Barrett Look’. With a few seconds’ more examination, it became obvious that this was in fact an ancestor which, at least, explained his expression.

Don’t look at me like that, I thought. There’s a reason we can afford paintings like that of you, and it’s because you lot were a bunch of arrogant, immoral bastards. All I wanted was to have extremely quiet sex with a young lawyer-in-training which, I was certain, nobody was about to pay me very much money to do.

I turned away, feeling the old bugger’s glare on the back of my neck. I wondered what he’d say if he could have known that one of his descendants had brought his Indian girlfriend along to another’s lesbian engagement party.

With a bit of luck, I thought consolingly, he’d have shot himself.

\* \* \*

The morning came far too soon. The distant threat of a hangover cast a pall over everything, and I hoped that I’d be able to shovel away a decent breakfast before it found me. As it was, I had just enough self-control not to hurl my cousins bodily through the window when they kicked the day off with a pillow fight at seven-thirty in the morning.

Sonia seemed to be in better shape than I was when I was finally showered, shaved and in a state that vaguely resembled ‘presentable’. Despite having to share a single bed with a small girl and (I hoped) having had to go to sleep tormented by the thoughts of all the deviant behaviour we had so narrowly missed out on, she appeared well-rested and almost cheerful. Anastasia smiled happily and innocently at me, putting my restraint to an even greater test, but I managed to simply return her shy ‘good morning’ and resist the impulse to throw marmalade at her.

The day accelerated from there. The family went out into the city for a meal, beginning the drinking from there. Their apparent adoption of Sonia came with the unfortunate side-effect that she now had access to all of their dysfunctional behaviour and habits. She took it all like a champ, seemingly as pleased to be included as they were to include her.

Uncle Andrew joined us at lunch, the only reference made to our conversation yesterday a quick nod to both Sonia and me when he entered. Sonia, who had taken to him more than any other member of the family, gave him a smile and a wave.

Lunch lasted for some time, and with the amount of alcohol we got through I was relieved that I was still considered a child and therefore not expected to contribute in any way to the bill. Most of my money went towards groceries and buying the occasional dinner for myself and Sonia. After being away from my family for half a year, the reminder of how easily they lived took me aback. I'd never wanted for anything in particular whilst living in Newcastle, but it was a world away from this whole weekend. I wondered what Sonia thought about it. Had this been an adventure for her: a holiday from the everyday life in Newcastle? A quick peek into this kind of life, where money was almost meaningless? Would she ever consider it a reason to stay with me, or might it repel her, scaring her off somehow? Sonia had always displayed more awareness of inequality than I managed to; it was hard to predict how she'd feel.

She seemed happy, at least. And my relatives, whilst welcoming in any case, only got more affectionate with drink. She'd made a new friend in Uncle Andrew, with whom she spent several minutes in quiet conversation as I was forced to admire various photos of one of my aunts' cats. All in all, it had seemed to be the best introduction that we could have hoped for.

We were both due back at work the next day, and neither of us wanted to start our Monday with an early morning train journey to Newcastle. We finally said goodbye to the family as a whole, rather than taking an extra hour to get through every one of them. Then we left the restaurant and made our way as quickly as possible, which was surprisingly quick under the circumstances, to King's Cross, where we could seize hold of a coffee and a place to sit down for an hour or so.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The trip to London, through what I'd seen and what I had learned, was an event I came to view as a separation in my two experiences in working with Julian: far more than any other weekend. I knew that Uncle Andrew had been looking out for my best interests during our meeting, but there was no way I could have stopped it from altering my perspective on Julian, our friendship, or even my presence in Newcastle. Every time I thought about it on the train ride back, I felt a jumbled mix of confusion and guilt.

Sonia informing on Julian to Uncle Andrew, or rather pushing me to do so, hadn't been mentioned. If either of us were aware of any ill feeling because of it, we didn't acknowledge it. I was already, absurdly, feeling betrayed by Julian. I didn't know whether it was because of the punch or because he'd not told me. I didn't know why I should have expected him to, but I did.

It got to the point that by that Sunday night I was almost dreading going back into the Civic Centre. Sonia, perhaps aware of my mood, stayed the night after picking up some clothes from her flat.

'It'll be fine,' she said. 'You think he's suddenly going to start hitting people? Or you?'

I shook my head, not able to rise to the joke. 'I just don't know if I'm going to be able to not show that I know.'

She put her arm around my shoulders, leaning against me more as we sat in the bed together. 'You're going to have to be a good liar. Just pretend he's your mother.'

'And that's your best advice, counsellor?'

'Short of beating him to the punch, that's pretty much it.' She paused, drumming her fingers against my arm. 'I'm sorry,' she said, eventually. 'I know it's weird. Super weird.'

'Super weird,' I agreed.

It would have been better – far better – if the story had been wholly unbelievable: an idea which no-one could conceive, knowing Julian. But, as I'd realised in Uncle Andrew's office, the details were hardly outlandish enough for it to be so. Certain people were very easy to picture drawing back a fist and letting fly, just as others were impossible to imagine doing so. Uncle Andrew, for instance, would be the latter: a

textbook example for whoever taught such things. I was almost certainly the same. Sonia...it was difficult to say. She definitely had the will to do so, but she was the type to think through the results and repercussions of everything she was going to do, determined not to make a mistake which might in some way threaten her future. If she punched you, it was because there would have been no quieter way of doing things.

Julian, however, had that sort of edge to him which you could imagine taking over in a moment's loss of temper. And as fast as he might douse the anger, a punch couldn't be retracted or explained away.

And you ended up on Newcastle City Council.

Sonia was still looking at me with some concern, as though afraid I was on the verge of breaking down in tears. But I wasn't upset – not very much, at least – or even angry.

I was disappointed.

Julian hadn't been a hero to me; people never became heroes after you'd met them, and heroes you'd had before tended to become human following the first meeting. But he'd seemed like a good man who wanted the best for people, and who was clever and ambitious enough to force that change into the world.

And now, through a combination of lies, politics and a single lapse in judgement, he'd do nothing.

And tomorrow I'd have to pretend I didn't know.

'Let's just go to sleep,' I said, not keen to have this conversation with Sonia at the moment. I was still trying to work out her feelings on this revelation. Once I'd gotten past my own shock, I realised that I'd been expecting some sort of triumph at the news: a sense of superiority at her proving herself to be, on one of countless potential levels, better than Julian. I'd expected her to introduce a series of new jokes into her repertoire based around the topic, levelling them against him in retaliation for any comment made about our relationship.

But there'd been none of that. Sonia had expressed her initial surprise, offered me sympathy whenever, like a few minutes ago, I'd mentioned the issue, and that had been her sole reaction. It didn't click with what I had come to know about her, and for that reason alone it struck me as odd. But what was I supposed to do, ask her to make jokes about it?

So, taking a page out of her book, I'd stayed quiet. Sonia was happy enough to get her head down after the day's train journey, and soon we were drifting off, our arms loosely around each other.

The next day, we set off towards work together, separating as we approached the Civic Centre to use to different entrances. This wasn't so that we could avoid the comments made by the receptionist (although it was a definite bonus), but due to our places of work being at completely different locations.

Sonia gave me a quick kiss before we parted for the day. 'Good luck,' she said. 'It'll be fine.'

I nodded absently, waving to her as she walked away before turning to face the staircase up to the foyer. Well, several Barretts had probably charged towards certain death at the swords, arrows and bullets of some enemy army on a few occasions over the centuries. I knew they had; I'd seen the paintings. That meant I should be able to force myself to go to work.

In theory.

Feeling quite certain that a number of my ancestors were shaking their heads or whichever body parts they had left in disappointment, I trudged slowly up the steps: the latest charge of the Barrett Clan into enemy territory.

The family probably wouldn't commission a landscape of it.

Once inside the building it was a little easier to go on, mostly because I would have looked very silly if I'd walked right back out again. I took the stairs one at a time, prolonging the inevitable on the basis that it would still be there when I eventually got to it.

Julian seemed to be in good spirits when I finally pushed through the door (generations of dead Barretts raised their glasses at another victory in the family books). He was reading through emails, bending over his desk rather than sitting down: a sure sign that his endless energy was in full swing.

'Ah, the Southerner,' he said in greeting. 'I'm amazed you made it in today; I've heard about your family's parties. Did it get much out of control? Any scandals?'

I shook my head, managing a smile. 'Not unless you consider a lesbian engagement a scandal, and most of them seem to have accepted it by now.'

'Very forward-looking of them,' Julian commented. 'Did Sonia pass muster, or are you looking at two sets of angry in-laws now?'

Just once it would be nice if everyone got along and worked together for peace, good and the general unity of mankind, I thought. Then again, there'd already been one prominent figure who'd run on that platform, and they'd nailed Him to a big cross, so it was probably an impractical manifesto.

'They seemed to take to her,' I said. 'Faster than they ever took to me, anyway.' I reached for a non-Sonia topic at random. 'Had a look around Parliament, too' I said, nonchalantly. 'Got given a tour by a civil servant.'

Julian looked up in interest. 'Oh, what did you think? Did you see the lobbies? The busts? The big cushions full of wool?'

I nodded. 'Yep: really thorough visit. Lots I didn't know about the place.'

He smiled. 'There's a lot I never learned. I really should have gone on the tour, but I thought it might look a little unprofessional, you know.'

I didn't bother asking where his line between 'professional' and 'unprofessional' behaviour was drawn, instead asking, 'So, what's the plan for the day?'

The plan, it turned out, was meetings. Julian had damn near stacked our day with the things. I looked down the list quickly. People from housing, some legal people, people in charge of budgeting and the city's social workers...yes, there was quite an obvious picture to the whole thing.

'So, this is about the policy?' I asked, striving to appear interested rather than sceptical. It probably was too much to hope that he'd given the whole thing up as I was sipping whisky in London.

'That's right,' Julian said happily. 'Even the Government's not got the faintest idea what they're doing, so we may as well take ten steps now rather than three and a half in a few weeks. Take the initiative, lead the charge, etcetera etcetera.'

'You're expecting the national politicians to object?' I asked, trying again to not sound like I was drilling holes in his lifeboat. What I wanted was to know what he thought was going to happen when they caught wind of this. Especially as, thanks to Sonia, Uncle Andrew and me, that was probably going to happen in a couple of days.

He shrugged. 'Why would they? It's a local policy; it doesn't tread on their toes and we're not trying to make it happen all over the country.' He flashed me a quick grin. 'Not just yet, anyway. Now, come on. I want some coffee before we get started.'

I followed him out of the office, holding back a sigh. This was shaping up to have all the makings of a wonderful argument with someone.

That made me think of Uncle Andrew. Was this the sort of thing he'd want to know about? He'd asked me to keep him informed, but he had been pretty sparse on the details of what he'd wanted to know. Did this matter, or would he consider it an obvious continuation of what I'd already divulged?

I very much wanted this to not be my call. I very much, in fact, wanted this not to be happening. I very much wanted to remain in the EU and to see what would have happened with devolution.

I decided that discretion was the better part of valour (my ancestors probably disagreed, but some of them had probably hanged witches and supported Charles I). Uncle Andrew didn't need to know about this.

The meetings were dull. In fairness, meetings almost always are, but these carried with them (to me at least), the knowledge that nothing of what was actually discussed in them would end up mattering. It was almost comical to hear Julian describe his grand idea to a conference table of people who were expected to give feedback from their particular area of local government expertise and bring to him the immediate issues they could see, when Newcastle would never see its new social housing and when Julian's career as city council leader, achieved with a single punch, existed only as long as Corbyn and Uncle Andrew said so.

I tried my best to pay some attention, if only because I didn't need to hear another amused lecture from Sonia about not taking my role as protégé seriously, but it was hard going.

The meetings were broken up by coffees and lunch, which we ate in the staff canteen. Whilst we were there, Julian engaged several council employees in earnest conversation about his vision of Newcastle as the Helsinki of the North or however people would one day describe it; I focused mainly on the peculiar plate of curry I'd been served as well as wondering what the policy on second helpings was.

Then all too soon lunch was over, and we were back at it. Whatever had been in the curry certainly made it easier to sit up straighter and pay attention for the second rounds of meetings about the possibility of doing something which we apparently probably wouldn't, and I was able to take more notice of what was said and the questions asked. It all meant as much as it had done before lunch, but at least I was no longer mentally reliving Tom and Sonia's greatest erotic hits of 2016 whilst it was going on.

The final meeting took place with most of the council present, barring a couple of members who'd had the good sense to be at home sick. With all of the information, queries, answers and reservations that he'd spent his day amassing, Julian outlined his vision to them. All of them, I realised, were hearing the proposal for the first time.

I watched the faces I could see, trying to gauge their reactions. They didn't give much away, though I occasionally saw them glance at one another when Julian wasn't looking at them. Still, I got the sense that some of them liked what they were hearing. There probably wasn't much opportunity to grab headlines as a city councillor, and if this thing actually took place then everyone would have to know that it was *they* who had made sure it had happened.

Julian had to have known that. He could almost certainly relate.

'I'm not looking for a yes or a no answer now, particularly not no,' he said, to the kind of polite laughter they probably teach city councillors. 'Just think it over, give yourselves a few days and then...' he shrugged modestly, 'we can talk seriously about it and I can address any questions or concerns.' He smiled. 'Thank you very much for making the time.'

He shook hands with several councillors who were heading to the door before turning to me with a thumb held up. I nodded, wishing that I could share in his optimism, when I saw someone enter, rather than exit, the room.

'Ah, Julian.' The voice was rich with the Geordie dialect. With a voice like that, there were a limited number of contenders, and it wasn't a surprise to see that it was Ken Johnson. There weren't many people that were more Geordie than Johnson. He was the genuine article.

Julian turned around, doing his absolute best to smile. If you didn't know him, then you might have believed it. 'Ken,' he said, offering a hand without hesitation. 'Something on your mind?' His tone didn't quite hide what Julian appeared to think the chances of that were. I saw a couple of councillors who'd contrived to stay in the room, watching the display out of the corners of their eyes and listening past overloud conversations. Whatever was going to go down, and there seemed to be little doubt that *something* was in the descendant, it was going to have an audience. If I was the entrepreneurial young man my family expected me to be, I'd have walked over there and started making odds.



Ken stood with his hands half-in his pockets. You couldn't parody Ken Johnson, I thought with hint of horrified admiration. Johnson was a parody of the very thing he was busy actually being. The energy it took must have been incredible.

'I was thinking,' he said (I risked a quick glance at Julian, but he'd had the wherewithal to pokerface), 'we should really talk about the likelihood of this...*policy*. I mean, I know the idea's got a decent motivation behind it, but —'

'But,' Julian interrupted, though politely, '...what? You don't think it'd work?'

Ken Johnson gave him the sort of look that people usually gave Ken Johnson. 'Well...*no*. Of course not. It's never going to get off the ground; the Party'd dogpile you if you tried it. I mean, come on: it would have been a grand idea when devolution was a sure thing, but it's Brexit we've got now. We've got to start embracing the opportunities of it.'

'Ah, right,' Julian said. Inside, I groaned; I could hear the sarcasm. You probably had to be a sarcastic little so-and-so yourself to pick up on it (something which my mother had, on several occasions, assured me that I most certainly was) and have spent a fair bit of time with Julian on top of that. I could see the end of this conversation, or at least the collection of flavours that the end of this conversation might come in. The best of them involved shouting; at least six finished with the Civic Centre being burned to the ground and the rebirth of Fascism.

'So,' the leader of Newcastle City Council went on, 'what sorts of possibilities do you think that we're going to get out of this? Just a ballpark.'

This time, Johnson's look had a bit more comprehension to it, and there was an edge to his voice too. 'We've got options besides Europe now, son,' he said. 'China, the US: plenty of deals to be made there, if we're smart about it. It's not like we only ever sent stuff to EU countries now, is it?'

'Fair bit of cash came back from the EU, though, didn't it?' Julian replied, his mild tone most definitely controlled. 'Few hundred million, right? Could have come in quite handy. You know, if we *were* going to be smart about it.'

'Government told us it could be replaced, didn't they?' Ken retorted. 'We'll have the money, and we can diversify. Meet the needs of whoever we're going to be doing business with. There's a hell of a lot could be on the table for the North East; I don't see why you're so shy about going after it.'

Julian shrugged. 'It's just that I thought that the North East had a plan. Something on the table already. Something that we were talking about every week, trying to get set up.'

'Yeah, what? Devolution?' Ken shook his head. 'It was a nice idea, and if the referendum'd gone the other way you know I'd be hammering away for it again. But *this*, Julian...this could be a hell of a lot bigger. There's *opportunities* for us, isn't there? Some way we can get the people back into jobs and some money back into the region?'

'Immigrants off our streets?' Julian suggested, his tone as calm and friendly as ever. Out of everything, that was probably the worst bit. It'd have been better if he'd have shouted it; it's not like the rest of us hadn't all heard.

To give Ken his credit, and I'd already done that for all of the three-syllable words he'd gone through so far, he wasn't shocked. He barely looked surprised, but more like Julian had disappointed him in some way. Maybe he had; the way Ken shook his head made it seem that way.

'Don't say that,' he said, quietly. 'You're really going to go there? Because everyone who voted for us to get out was a racist? All fifty-two percent of us? Over half the whole country?' He shook his head again. 'Did you never think that, with everyone giving their reasons for the last six months, that any of them had a *point*? Did you reckon that all of them were just saying what the organisation had gone and told them to say, because it were easier than saying they were racists? That they didn't know what they were talking about, or that they'd all been lied to about everything because they were that *stupid*?'

He took a step towards Julian on the last word. Julian didn't step back. He never would. But I saw his hands clench, maybe for a little more than a second. Johnson saw it too, and it seemed to make him stop. I stayed where I was, a few feet from both of them. If this was going to be a fight, I was going to keep out of it until someone else started trying to separate them.

Before I could get even more out-of-arm's-reach from the pair of them, Julian's hands had relaxed again. Ken looked at Julian and nodded. 'You're angry right now,' he said. 'I can understand that. I reckon if I'd was where you are now, I'd be pretty disappointed, and maybe a little angry too. But you're not the only one who's angry, Julian. There's a fair bit of the North East – I'd say a bit over half of it – who are feeling sold out by you and your mates in London. You know: the ones who have to

walk through their own dead high streets where everything's been shut down from lack of funding; the ones who can't find a job because they're all getting filled by migrants; the ones living below the breadline, having to go to foodbanks every day, sleeping outside City Hall. You can't ignore something like that, although Westminster's been pretty good at it.'

'You might have noticed that I'm not in Westminster right now, Ken,' Julian said.

'No. No you're not. But you were, and you had friends there. Friends with big plans. But did you have a plan for what's going on up here? Was devolution under a *Tory* Government going to help these people get homes? Get food? Because I can't bring myself to believe that. And I don't reckon your mate's going to have too much luck tackling that either, if he ever ends up PM.'

'We were going to help.' Julian wasn't quite speaking through clenched teeth, but it was a close thing. I checked that none of the councillors were recording this on their phones. It had occurred to me to do this, but only so Sonia could watch it later. Still, one North East politician powerbombing another through a table was the kind of bad press that Newcastle, last North East holdout of the Remain movement, did not need. 'We knew about the problems, and we were going to fix them.'

Ken shrugged. 'Well, maybe. I've seen a few promises broken before now, so you'll excuse me for being a little cynical. But even if you were, and I'm not saying that you weren't...well, that's all over, isn't it? No more Treasury, no more devolution. Because you're here now, and you've not got...ah, what's it called? *Political capital*. No, you're just the man in charge of deciding what Newcastle's not got the money for anymore. And it's not been the city centre, with the students or the tourists and all those fancy bars and old cinemas: it's been Benwell and Byker and those places that don't matter once money's tight. It's been the recycling, with your smart plan for saving money. And now...I don't know: maybe some of those places might have a better chance. Maybe you should think about what you can do for those areas instead of building some fancy flats to put your name on, because it's *not going to happen, mate*.'

Ken said the last sentence in a sudden rush, and then turned abruptly, walking past the onlookers as if they were furniture instead of an audience. I half-expected him to throw a raised fist in the air as he left, but either he'd never seen *The Breakfast Club* or just didn't think that it would be professional.

Julian stayed still for a few seconds after Johnson's exit, his eyes either looking at or just aimed at the space that the man had been standing in. He didn't look up at the remaining council employees, deprived of Newcastle City Council's dramatic re-enactment of *WrestleMania*, hastily left the room. That just left me alone with my mentor, who I had to assume was in the same kind of mood as when he'd decked the Chief Whip.

Then Julian started to walk out too. I followed him, not that keen on doing so but not wanting him to feel like I was trying to abandon him.

He didn't say anything as we walked through the corridors of the Civic Centre; he didn't start talking until we got back into his office and the door was shut. Then he sank into his chair, staring at the ceiling for a few seconds, before dropping his gaze down to me.

'Dickhead,' he said, quietly.

I didn't answer, but I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. I didn't much like Ken Johnson, but if you could stand through what he'd just said and feel like your best possible response was 'dickhead', then I really didn't know how I was supposed to feel about you either. Was Julian really so committed to this new social housing policy? It seemed like everyone else in politics had what you could politely call 'reservations' about it, and that should have counted for something.

'How do you think he knew?' I asked. I was almost certain that it had been Uncle Andrew, but I was keen to appear to have no idea. The last thing I wanted was Julian starting to try to find a leak, or for him to think that it might be me.

He didn't seem that interested in trying to identify his personal Judas Iscariot, though. All he did was give a slight shrug. 'We've been in meetings all day, talking about it. Any one of those people could have said something. Doesn't matter who.'

Well, that was something. The little display just now probably merited a text to Uncle Andrew. Ken Johnson, his man on the inside, was probably already drafting his mission report. I'd have to tell Sonia too. She finally had a reason to be proud of her MP.

'Just think,' Julian went on, almost wistfully. 'It could have all been different. I meant, we had a *plan*. A great plan to solve all of the nation's problems. Because there was only one way and it was our way, and they'd need us in power to stand a chance because the Tories were a bunch of merciless rich bastards who didn't give a damn about people like them. But they wanted this. They *voted* for this. And Remain just

told them that the ones in charge would fix it all: just keep things as they were, and it'd be different.' He gave a short, harsh laugh. 'Would you believe that? In their position?'

I shook my head. Living with my father had made me cynical, although that was far less damage than my mother had managed. Like them, and like Julian, I'd been focused on the big pictures of the referendum. Remain had been about big picture stuff: diplomatic ties, togetherness, globalism. Leave had appealed to people with what some would probably call 'small pictures': where would they get a job, how could they stop wages falling, how could they personally get out of poverty. But you could get posters where a lot of tiny little pictures made up one big one; I'd had one on my wall when I was eight. Maybe that's what Leave had been: they'd had some big pictures of their own, but they'd been made out of millions of small pictures which had mattered like hell to the people they'd come from.

Then again, maybe that image didn't fit the situation and I'd never be able to understand it. It had been that kind of week, and it was only Monday.

\* \* \*

'Fuck me,' Sonia said, making use of her favourite expression in the English language. 'How come you get the interesting days all the time? *I* was doing paperwork on occupancy rights in council housing. On that subject, let's talk about this over coffee.'

We went back to my flat, where I brewed Sonia some coffee whilst describing Julian and Ken's two-man production of *North East Side Story*. Once I was done, she held her mug in both hands, gazing musingly down into the black liquid inside.

'Well, looks like your uncle moves fast,' she said, after taking a sip.

'I was just thinking that,' I said. 'I would have thought he'd have someone a little less confrontational to mind than Ken Johnson.' I paused, thinking. 'Unless that was the point,' I added. 'Get him in such a foul mood he snaps again.'

Sonia shook her head. 'Julian wouldn't do that: not again. And Andrew's smart enough to know. Besides, he wants Julian out for his own good. He's not going to help him by setting him up like that.'

'I guess not,' I said, trying my own coffee. 'Anyway, what do you want to do tonight? I can make dinner.'

‘Nope,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘Surgery tonight in my constituency. Jean’s asked me to go along with some questions, plus a death threat if someone doesn’t get the bins sorted out soon. It’s getting to be beyond a joke.’

‘That woman’s relentless,’ I said. ‘And you don’t mind being the mouthpiece of a very old, slightly mad lady?’

‘Jean’s sharp as a tack,’ Sonia said. ‘It’s just getting about that’s the trouble. If Ken Johnson’s got any sense, he’ll pay attention to her.’

‘And *does* he have any sense?’ I asked.

Sonia shrugged, drinking more of her coffee. ‘We’ll see. He’s on your uncle’s side, which has got to count for something.’

She left soon afterwards, leaving me in the flat with no company and no plans. I was putting off making my call to Uncle Andrew, as though hoping that some perfect set of circumstances might do away with the need for it. Instead, I looked around the flat for inspiration.

Drinking was out; after twenty-four hours with my family I was both willing and in need of another detox. I wasn’t particularly keen on opening up my laptop either; I’d only end up looking at the news, which would be about politics.

Without really thinking about it, I picked up the T. Dan Smith book. I’d not been reading it cover to cover, but rather dipping in and out of it in the search for links between Smith and Julian when the mood took me. I did so now, shuffling through the pages before settling on a paragraph which struck me as ominous.

*Dan seriously believed that Harold Wilson’s Labour government would take his report seriously and would act on it. They did neither – possibly Dan’s single greatest disappointment in his life. He had given up his proven power base as Leader of Newcastle City Council to take on a regional role he believed was essential for the well-being both of the North and the country as a whole, only to find he had no power to influence events...*

Of all the people that I could compare my own mentor’s situation with, a man who had been sentenced to (I flipped through to a later chapter) six years in prison and who’d served three was pretty low down on my list of preferences. Of course, the man had gone down for corruption, but the similarities were stacking up: far too many to dismiss.

I read on, jumping from place to place at random. Various words and phrases leapt out at me as I read: *Dan wanted everything done yesterday. He did more work than*

*anybody I've ever known...I would have been a poor back-bench man, because I can't operate unless I am singing solo...his clear vision was to renew and uplift the city and make Newcastle a worthy regional capital...he had a special quality and stood head and shoulders above the rest of the Labour Group...great passion...it came from the heart...I admire the man a lot...Dan was a man of vision...*

I was sure that these descriptions could have been applied to plenty of people, but I was thinking in particular about Julian. The similarities had only seemed sharper when I read through a chapter on Smith's own struggle with Newcastle housing. Like Julian, at this point he'd become leader of the city council and, like Julian, had his ideas about what the region needed. He had constructed the concrete tower blocks which still dotted certain parts of the city, making sure that families could remain within Newcastle rather than move outside of it. The book had called it 'political dynamite', and I tried to imagine Uncle Andrew or Ken Johnson discarding that notion too.

Well, it was probably easier to do so now; architecture had come on a bit since the sixties. But the link which had grown between the two men as I'd read was doing little to reassure me, particularly in the new context in which I was seeing Julian. From what I'd read of Smith, and I couldn't imagine that there were scores of other biographies all over the world, he didn't seem like the type who'd haul off and punch someone. Corruption could be complicated to prove; Julian running Ken Johnson's head through a wall upon hearing a definitive 'no' to his embryonic policy would be relatively simple.

As midnight approached, I flipped towards the final chapters. Consciously or otherwise, I'd been avoiding reading about the end of Smith's political career in depth. Partly it was out of what I recognised even then as superstition: fear that the likeness I'd seen between the two men would mutate to the point where I'd be waiting for Julian to start accepting money and holidays for planning permission. It was the kind of trap that you could fall into if you didn't watch yourself, in my case at least.

Even with this in mind, there was the occasional sentence which caught my eye as I read through the final months of T. Dan Smith's career as 'Mr Newcastle'. *Dan would always make a living some way and would always be involved in politics – it was in his life's blood. And here were his own advisors, the only ones he had available, telling him he should plead guilty.* My mind flashed back to Uncle Andrew telling me that leaving politics would be for Julian's own good. It was hard to argue that Julian

didn't feel as passionately about politics as Smith; with the exception of alcohol, there was nothing else that he seemed to take an interest in.

Well, there was me, and I was informing on him. I read on.

*Dan felt like a drowning man being swept out to sea with no prospect of being able to get back to land. So he "took the rap", believing he would only get a light sentence and that he would be able to prove that the charges against him were ridiculous and without foundation. He was wrong on both counts.*

Another cheerful little parallel. Was Julian, like Dan Smith, facing his own exit from politics without any idea of its approach? Was I reading far more into these likenesses than they merited? How much of it was due to my own guilt, and how much of that guilt was well-deserved?

I tossed the book onto the floor and turned off the light. I wished I'd not read it now, and certainly not right before going to sleep; my brain had the unfortunate habit of tormenting me with any hypothetical scenario it could come up with late at night, usually picking the most stressful it could come up with.

There was nothing, I thought determinedly, that could be proved by any of this. What I was seeing between T. Dan Smith and Julian Ashworth were a few traits common enough among humanity and probably not extinct among politicians. The rest could be put down to luck and the fact that the pair of them were, after all, doing the same job.

Julian had punched someone, to my knowledge, once. For all I knew, it meant that he'd got it out of his system.

I could picture Sonia rolling her eyes at that but tried my best to keep the thought in my head as I turned over in the bed and shut my eyes.

\* \* \*

The Smith biography added yet another lens through which to view Julian over the next several days. The energy which had propelled his predecessor prior to his prosecution was certainly present in the current leader of the city council; it seemed that his meeting with Ken Johnson had not been able to blunt or perhaps had even served to sharpen his resolve, and he flung himself into his research with vigour.

Most of this involved examining similar projects to his which had been carried out across Europe and some parts of America, an exercise which required me demonstrating how to translate a website into English after Julian's grasp of Swedish proved unequal to his task.



‘The main problem,’ he told me, cheerfully saving a PDF of one webpage, ‘is going to be the money. I flatter myself that I’m rather good when it comes to budgeting, but the cash actually has to be there in the first place.’

‘And it’s not, I’m assuming?’

He shook his head. ‘You assume accurately. The new local government budget’s not officially been released, but I’ve heard enough about it from some old friends of mine.’

‘Bad?’ I hazarded.

‘Draconian,’ Julian confirmed. ‘It’s as though in some parallel universe we actually got devolution, and that’s where all of *our* money’s been shovelled off to. There’s going to be cuts: even more than there were already.’

Inwardly, I perked up a little. If the Tories could claim responsibility to murdering Julian’s latest policy idea, then perhaps his reaction would be less troublesome. If there was one thing that the majority of Labour supporters could agree with, it was that the Conservatives wanted nothing more than to take money, food and opportunities from those who already didn’t have enough. If Julian was singing from that prayer sheet, there’d be far fewer opportunities for a rift between him and his old friends.

Trying not to look like a region facing cuts on top of cuts was music to my ears, I ventured to say, ‘So...what then? If the money’s not there, then how are you going to do it?’

Julian grinned at me, which sent me right back to worrying. ‘Well, whilst my plan for the sale-of-property tax isn’t going to go far enough, and increasing it past its original scope isn’t practical, there are other ways to make money. I can imagine that there are several bodies who’d want to support ethical and sustainable housing for key areas of the population, and there’s things that we could be doing around the city and the council to make the numbers up: tighten our belts, that sort of thing.’

I felt moved to say something but stamped on the impulse. Maybe I would have before the last few days, or perhaps that’s what had pushed me to speak in the first place. But I wasn’t just wary of gainsaying someone with a great deal more experience in politics than I had; there was the sense that speaking up wouldn’t do any good. Julian had arrived in Newcastle steadfastly determined to create the greatest region in Britain out of devolution, and had it gone through then that focus would have been a huge driving force behind it. Now he had his new idea, his latest passion, and he had conceived of it in such a way that responsibility for its success lay upon him. He was

its architect, its herald and its champion. Against that, I doubted than anything I could say would make him change course.

For all I knew, he was entirely right about this policy and everything he'd said made perfect sense. But I was more concerned with what would happen if he was wrong, and if Uncle Andrew and Ken Johnson proved to know the current political climate better.

Smith had probably thought that he was doing the right thing or, failing that, that he'd never get found out.

But beyond something else to add to the background whine of worry in my mind, there wasn't too much in what he said that I had to stress over. I put the thought behind me, focused on the day and tried my best to enjoy Julian's renewed positivity. It wasn't until that afternoon that I managed to invite more trouble into my life.

'So,' I asked, as I arrived back into the room bearing two coffees, 'what did you mean about the council tightening its belts? Where could you save the money from?'

Julian accepted the coffee as though it was the elixir of life, taking a long gulp of it before answering. 'There are a range of options,' he said. 'It all depends how unpopular those are with how many people, but you're talking about things such as raising council tax, charging more for extra rubbish collection as well as finding ways to stretch the resources we have. The Conservatives are really ushering this whole practice in with their budget, so there'll be some cover from fire there. And, of course, there's the council employees themselves. We might have to look at reducing staff, both in here and out there.' He gestured at the city centre beyond his window. 'It's unfortunate, but there's a limited amount we can do about it.' He leaned back in his chair, still engaged with the idea. 'Certain programmes we get through funding, but whatever comes out of pocket is going to have to be let go: internships and the like. As much as it's viable to do so, I'd like to try and protect the employees here.'

I took a drink of coffee, hoping to obscure as much of my face as possible. A leaden weight had just dropped into my stomach, though it may well have been the other shoe. Julian had finally managed to do what I'd assumed he couldn't: made his new project have some form of impact upon me personally.

I didn't ask about Sonia's job. I didn't know whether it was discomfort from bringing up our relationship in front of someone who, at best, viewed it with ambivalence; it might have even been worry that he may regard it as a perk. I'd never quite understood from where the disdain Julian and Sonia had for each other had

originated from. I was willing to accept that it was something I might have missed. I'd never claimed to be particularly socially observant. But not knowing how it started and not ever being told exactly what either party thought about the other made it extremely difficult to have a handle on, and I'd recently taken to simply not mentioning one to the other.

The whole mess stayed sitting on my mind for the rest of the day, and even more so because I knew that I would have to tell Sonia. If this came to anything, then I didn't want to be in a position where I'd been keeping secrets from her. Of course, telling her that there was now a risk of her job becoming non-existent probably wasn't going to be the most diplomatic thing I'd do this week, but at least this way if she was angry then she'd not be directing it at me.

When she did hear it, sitting back on her sofa with a mug of green tea, her reaction wasn't the icy anger that I'd expected. Instead, the hand holding her mug paused just before her lips for a second: a slight hesitation as she ran the words I'd just told her through her head. Then she raised the tea up the rest of the way, took a sip, and placed it down carefully.

'I see,' she said, her tone thoughtful and almost distant. I waited to see if there was going to be more coming from her, but that seemed to be as much as she was willing to give up.

'He didn't mention your job specifically,' I said, for all the good that would do.

Sonia shook her head. 'That would've been unusual.' She looked off into space for a moment, and then turned to me, as if she'd only just noticed that I was there. 'Thanks for telling me. I won't worry about it unless it seems more definite, though.'

I was baffled. Sonia normally fired barbs at Julian with such regularity that you'd swear she did it for her own enjoyment, but now that there was finally something that she could objectively hold against him, there was nothing: no fury, no denouncements of his character and no inventive new insults. This calm magnanimity in the face of this threat to her employment had caused me to miss several steps on my mental staircase.

'You're not...' I searched for a word that would be both accurate and unlikely to insult her, 'annoyed?'

She shrugged. 'I really don't think this vanity project of his is ever actually going to materialise; no-one apart from him seems to care much about it, let alone believe in

it. So it's not like he'll need the cash, will he? And then maybe he'll have time to sort the dustbins out; stranger things have happened.'

'It's not just that,' I said, shifting a little uncomfortably. 'There's the new budget for local governments. They're going to have to make cuts anyway to manage. There's not going to be enough money.'

She looked at me again, her gaze at the same time both placid and somehow calculating. After a moment, she asked, 'Do you think he'd still go after my job? Whatever else has to get cut, I mean.'

I wanted to say no, or rather I wanted to be able to say no honestly. Because that would have meant that the tension and bitterness which had somehow sprouted between the pair of them wouldn't be there, and I wouldn't have to spend so much of my time either defending one friend to another or acting like I'd not heard what they'd just said about each other.

Stuck in a world where things weren't that easy, I shrugged. 'I don't know,' I sighed. 'Maybe.' It would have been nice if I could have said something to soften it, but there really wasn't much I could say, or at least nothing that was honest.

Sonia at least seemed to realise that. She reached a hand out towards me, beckoning for me to sit next to her. I moved from the wall I'd been leaning against, sitting beside her on the sofa. She leaned against me, resting her head on my shoulder.

'I'm glad you told me,' she said, after a while. 'I know this is...well, it's a weird situation, and it probably sucks for you.' She paused, and then went on. 'Look, don't worry about me; you've got enough going on. I'll be alright.'

'You're sure?' It still seemed to me as though she wasn't giving this the importance it seemed to demand. On the other hand, Sonia took her career and future extremely seriously, so if *she* wasn't worried then it probably meant that there wasn't any need, even if I couldn't work out why.

I gave up and put my arm around her. If she wanted to explain, she would.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The world had changed, and it kept changing. It wasn't just my new job as a spy, or my existence being kept a secret from my girlfriend's entire family that was troubling me. Across the ocean, the US elections were becoming the most ludicrous and vicious event of the year: a title which had already been hotly contested. Satirists tried as hard as they could, but turning what was already happening into something more ridiculous was a challenge to the most seasoned of comedians.

Julian remained as dismissive of Donald Trump as he ever had been, and just as certain that Hillary Clinton would be the new President of the United States. He didn't seem particularly enthused with that idea, but at least it represented to him a kind of sanity that the world had apparently become unmoored from.

That had to be something.

As the election neared, even Brexit paled in comparison. As unlikely as Trump becoming president was, his ascent had been just as improbable. Our country's own experience with unexpected outcomes had injected uncertainty into the dynamic, giving hope to Trump's support base and a chill of unease to those desperate to keep him out of the White House.

It seemed almost unfair that another country's elections could be an event which dominated so much of Britain's conversation. I doubted that many Americans had been keeping track of the EU Referendum in its final hours, or that most of them had even known that the question was being asked. It would have been nice, if not exactly practical, to be able to forget that any of this was happening.

Still, the possibility of the new president being a man at that point diagnosed with so many personality disorders that he probably qualified as six different people was definitely an international conversation topic, in a way that Britain's exit from the European Union couldn't really hope to top. I supposed it was a good thing that people did care about that sort of thing, even if it did lead to Julian muttering darkly under his breath more than usual.

The approaching chaos was even enough to distract me from my guilt at keeping watch over one of my two friends and my ongoing worries about Sonia's position at the council (she remained stubbornly relaxed about the whole issue). Most of the time I accompanied Julian as he visited possible sites for his dream of sustainable social housing or sat with him in meetings where he did his best to convince others that what

he was proposing was achievable, right and proper. His energy never flagged, reminding me somewhat wistfully of my first meeting with him.

But something happened, a week before the American presidential election, to bring all of it right back to the forefront of my mind.

Uncle Andrew called.

I'd left the Civic Centre about fifteen minutes ago and was waiting at the bus station for a quick trip home and a large pot of coffee. I felt the phone vibrate in my pocket and tugged it out. As I did so, I saw the garish yellow bus move into view through the window. I checked the caller, raising my eyebrows in surprise at the name. More guilt swept through me: was my uncle making sure that I wasn't shirking my unofficial assignment? Was he annoyed that there'd been no results so far? I'd half-forgotten to call him after the Julian's argument confrontation with Ken Johnson and had managed to turn that into simply not getting in touch.

I put the phone to my ear. 'Hi Uncle Andrew.'

*'Tom, hello. I haven't caught you at a bad moment, have I?'*

'No, but one second,' I said, keeping the phone wedged against my ear with my shoulder whilst finding my ticket. 'Just about to get on a bus.'

*'No problem.'*

I let the driver punch a hole in my ticket, sat down and rearranged myself again. 'Sorry,' I said. 'I'm all ears.'

*'Well, it was just a quick question. I'm going to be in Newcastle from the ninth, staying for a couple of days. And I wondered if you and Sonia would like to come out to dinner on the tenth. My treat, of course.'*

I was so surprised at the reason for his call and so ready to defend myself for the lack of news that I'd been sending to him, that for a moment I didn't know what to say. Then I managed to come up with something. 'That...that'd be really great, thanks. I'd love to; I'm sure Sonia would like it too.'

*'I was thinking that it might be nice if Julian joined us too.'*

I hesitated. I had fostered, somewhere over the course of this year, the instinct to completely trust Uncle Andrew. If he thought that having Julian there was a good idea, or at least didn't think that anything terrible would come of it, then I had to believe that he was right. He had known his friend for a lot longer than I had and was still extending the invitation knowing the pressure that Julian had been feeling. I

considered telling him about the strange tension which had developed between Julian and Sonia, but then backed away from the task.

‘I...yes, that sounds good,’ I said, stumbling a little over the words. I’d been hoping to cover up my hesitation, but it didn’t seem likely that he’d have missed it.

‘Good,’ my uncle said. *‘There’s a place I know that serves excellent steaks. Does Sonia like steaks, do you know?’*

Sonia did like steaks: liked them enough not to let her own religion get between her and them. She also had extremely high standards when it came to the steaks she ate and was not shy about pointing out flaws, as I’d learned weeks before. I assumed she’d be more polite to a waiter, or at least hoped she would be.

‘Very much,’ I said. ‘I’ll let you know if she’s free; I’ll be seeing her tomorrow.’

‘Perfect. In which case, I look forward to seeing hopefully both of you in a week. Have a good evening, Tom.’

‘Uncle Andrew?’

‘Yes?’

Again, I paused, not even sure how I was supposed to frame what I wanted to say. Still, it seemed important that I tried.

‘I’ve been keeping an eye out,’ I said, finally, ‘like you wanted me to. On Julian. But there’s not been anything, really. I didn’t want you to think that I’d not been doing it...’ I trailed off, embarrassed. If he’d heard about the row with Ken, and I was almost certain he’d had a hand in that happening in the first place, then my profession that nothing had taken place must have rung especially hollow. And that was without his determination to create affordable and sustainable housing out of what increasingly appeared to be the ether. Double-O Seven I was not.

Uncle Andrew didn’t say anything for a moment. I wondered what he was thinking. Then he coughed and said. *‘I appreciate you telling me, Tom. And for doing this. I know it can’t be easy, but it really is important.’*

‘I know,’ I said. And I did: definitely more than I had when he’d first asked. ‘Well...I’ll see you soon, then.’

‘See you soon, Tom. And thank you again.’ The phone went dead. I tucked it back into my pocket, wondering how the meal would go and how much chaos we’d have to wade through to reach it. There was still a week to go.

I called Sonia up once I was home, holding my mug of coffee against my chest. It was getting colder in Newcastle, and I was thankful for the thick stone walls of my apartment. Even so, a hot drink certainly helped.

Sonia answered midway through the second ring. *'Hey, what's up? Has Julian put a hit out on someone? Are the severance packages draining money from Newcastle's bright future, and so he's started assassinating the staff?'*

'Nothing so exciting, I'm afraid. Uncle Andrew called. He's in town next week and wanted to know whether you fancied grabbing dinner. He mentioned steaks.'

*'Oh, cool. Sure, I'd love to. I take it he's betting on a Clinton victory, then?'*

'Hasn't mentioned cyanide pills, so I think it's meant to be a celebration.' I said. 'At the very least, we can all get pretty drunk.'

*'All?'* Sonia asked, her voice casual.

I winced, but it would have been difficult to keep it a secret for long. 'Yes,' I replied. 'He's going to invite Julian too.'

This time, I was on the receiving end of the hesitation. I wondered if mine had been as obvious. *'I see,'* Sonia said, after a second. *'Well, that sounds...it'll be nice to see Andrew again.'*

That was about as diplomatic an answer I could probably hope to expect, I and took it gratefully. Sonia hadn't made much mention of Julian or the threat which he seemed to represent to her future, which had made me both thankful and increasingly curious. 'We could grab a couple of drinks beforehand,' I said, hoping to move past this sticky area. 'Start the celebration early at Alvino's? Push the boat out a little.'

Sonia seemed just as keen to avoid talking about Julian as I was to prevent an argument about him. *'Good plan,'* she said, quickly. *'Then again, that place seems kind of like bad luck for us. Wouldn't want to jinx any other political events.'*

'Well, we'd be going after the election,' I reasoned. 'It'll already have happened, whatever *does* happen.'

*'Don't,'* she said. *'I've had enough of this whole thing. I just want to curl up in bed on Wednesday night and forget that any of this is happening.'*

'Then why not come over?' I suggested. 'We can distract each other from it: make sure we're not too focused on anything depressing.'

She laughed. *'"Distract each other"? Nice euphemism, slick. Sure, I'll come over and we can not watch the news this time. I'll have work the next morning, though.'*



‘I won’t,’ I said. ‘Julian said he didn’t have to be in, so wouldn’t be. But that means I can fix you breakfast.’

*‘Very kind of you. Well, you’ve twisted my arm; I’ll be there. See you tomorrow?’*

‘See you tomorrow, you. Have a good night.’

*‘Likewise.’* She hung up.

Well, that had gone better than expected. You couldn’t have missed the uncertainty when the subject of Julian’s attendance had been brought up, but at least there’d not been a row about it. I could not, however, shake the feeling that there was a row somewhere in front of us, hovering an unspecified distance away whilst remaining in plain sight.

I settled back in my armchair, taking the notes I’d made in Julian’s briefings and starting to look through them. There were cuts that needed to be made, and more so than ever before. Julian had amassed a large stack of papers and was having to use them to come to some difficult decisions. With his permission, I’d made some copies with the intention of familiarising myself with the same problem.

Within an hour, my coffee sat cold as I flipped through the pages. How the region could go from the high hopes of devolution to this prospective economic state was mind-blowing. I couldn’t understand how Julian kept himself from sinking into despair. The future didn’t seem to allow for a shred of optimism.

Maybe that’s why he was so fixated on this project. Perhaps without the hope of achieving anything positive, he’d not be able to face coming into the office every day.

Not the most reassuring thought.

I gave up thirty minutes later. If anyone could make head or tails of this, it wasn’t me. All I knew was that I was relieved that it wouldn’t be my signature on any of cuts which would have to be made. God knew what 2017 was going to bring, but if things kept on the way they were now then the most profitable course of action seemed to be Newcastle splitting off from Britain and raiding it for resources like Vikings.

I amused myself for a few minutes by imagining this, then shoved the papers aside and sipped some of my chilled coffee. This wasn’t my job. The way this country was going, this never *would* be my job.

The thought hit me with sudden clarity. There’d been no conscious determination in it, but somehow it seemed like a decision I’d been working hard towards. Whatever charms politics might have held for me at the start, they were gone and the memories were fading fast. It had all been tied up in Julian’s optimism and passion, but whilst

that seemed to have returned after its brief departure, the attraction I'd had towards politics had been stripped away without me quite noticing until now. The world had simply kept going, rudely unconcerned by my change of heart.

God, what was I going to do now? Where was I going to go? I doubted that my parents would fund my current lifestyle forever. In fact, I was certain of it. So, there went living in Newcastle. That turned my mind directly towards Sonia. Could you make long distance work this early in a relationship? I'd no idea; Sonia was my first girlfriend and she hadn't come with a manual.

I abandoned the coffee and poured myself a whisky. My thoughts had gotten heavy enough that non-alcoholic drinks weren't going to cushion them.

Roll on the United States election and dinner with Julian.

A week passed, with the usual blare of noise and shouting that I'd by then grown numb to. Julian had accepted Uncle Andrew's invitation to dinner and gave every sign of looking forward to it. It was at least nice to know that the two of them still spent time together outside of politics, however sporadically. Now if only I could make peace between Julian and Sonia. Then again, I'd have to get the two of them to admit that they had a problem with each other, which both were steadfastly refusing to acknowledge.

I was mostly trying to get through every day as it came, reaching for the end of the week and a finish to the year's freshest batch of insanity. Julian's intensity in regard to his North East-based Elysium had even dropped a couple of notches as, like most of the world, all of his attention was focused across the Atlantic. He was operating more or less on automatic, which at least meant fewer mad dashes between meetings.

Finally, the day came. Sonia and I left the city centre together, boarded a bus and all but barricaded the door once we were inside the flat. I moved into the kitchen to put the kettle on as she got changed, and then switched rooms with her so I could get out of the suit.

I was sitting on the floor, looking up at my pitiful collection of films, trying to find one that would diametrically oppose the madness happening all around us. It was a tall order.

Sonia came back in from the kitchen, holding two mugs of tea. She put one in front of me, cupping her own between both hands and inhaling the steam from it as she sat down beside me.

'You alright?' she said. 'Not thinking too much about it?'

‘Difficult not to,’ I said. ‘Future of the free world and all that.’

Sonia hesitated. ‘We could always watch –’

‘No,’ I said, cutting her off. ‘We said we weren’t going to, and we won’t. Besides,’ I said, putting my arm around her, ‘we’d not know until tomorrow morning, and then you’d have to go to work.’

‘You act like I couldn’t do that job in my sleep,’ Sonia replied, resting her head on my shoulder. ‘If it’s worrying you, I don’t mind.’

I smiled at her. ‘I’ll be okay. Let’s just get through tonight, and tomorrow the world will be back to normal.’

Sonia laughed. ‘I remember you saying something similar about the referendum.’

‘Really? I don’t remember much about that night. Kind of lost my thread after the fourth drink.’

‘Oh really? You don’t remember the two of us ending up in bed together? Us starting a relationship? Nothing like that?’

‘Well, I’d been drinking a lot –’ I broke off as Sonia punched me on the shoulder, laughing again.

‘Come on, you insensitive bastard,’ she said, turning on the television. ‘Pick a movie, and let’s forget about America.’

The evening was still tense, but comfortably so. It was hard to think about the problems besetting the world when I had a beautiful girl leaning against me, plus a hot chamomile tea.

We finally settled on a horror movie, loud and gaudy enough to provide a decent enough distraction. When, at last, the film’s CGI monster was violently put to rest, we decided to call it a night. I checked the time on my phone as we stood, moving towards the kitchen and bathroom.

‘Just past eleven,’ I said. ‘They’ll have started counting the votes now.’

‘I don’t envy them,’ Sonia said. ‘Lot of counting.’

‘Can’t believe it could be eight hours until we know.’

‘Like I said.’ She dumped our mugs in the sink, filling them both with soap and water. ‘Lot of counting. Still, I know a way we could make it go faster.’

‘Oh yeah?’ I asked. ‘And what’d that be?’

‘By getting into bed and going to sleep.’

I gave up, following her through into the bathroom. We brushed our teeth, washed up our mugs, and then climbed into the big white bed, Sonia fitting perfectly into my

arms. That was new, I thought. I remembered, months ago, when we'd be twisting and turning for what had seemed like hours, never able to find a position that worked. Now we seemed able to slot into place with ease, no conferring required. It was a nice feeling, and it made me smile to think about it.

After a while, Sonia turned around. I could barely make her out in the dark, but I could see the slight shine of her eyes out of the gloom.

'What's up?' I asked.

'Nothing,' she said. 'I just wanted to look at you.'

I wrapped my arms a little more around her, bringing her closer to me. 'I see.'

'How are you feeling now?' she asked, her voice quiet yet clear.

'Don't worry about me,' I said. 'It's not me he's been talking about. What about you? You okay?'

'America's a long way away, Tom.'

'That's not the point.'

I saw, barely, the outline of her head nod. 'I know. And I...well, I guess it would change things if he did win. And maybe they'd change if he didn't too. But, right now, I'm not thinking about it. I'll get to that tomorrow morning.'

I nodded myself. She leaned forward suddenly and kissed me on the lips. I was surprised she'd been able to see them in the dark, but her aim was spot on. When we broke apart, she went back to looking at me. I could hear her breathing softly just in front of me.

'I love you.'

I started, completely taken aback. That was the first time any girl had ever said that to me, or at least the first one who'd not been a much younger cousin.

'Where...where did that come from?' I asked.

I felt the covers move, and I guessed that she'd shrugged. 'The last few days, I guess. Or...well, I suppose the last several months, cumulatively. Just...a lot of things. That I've noticed.' She shrugged again. 'Does it...does it bother you? Me telling you?'

I moved closer to her, feeling her breath and strands of hair against my face. 'Of course not. You just caught me by surprise.' I took a breath, and she seemed to guess what I was going to say next.

'You don't have to,' she said. 'You don't have to say it just because I did.'

‘No,’ I said, pulling her towards me, pressing her small body against mine. ‘I’ve never been like this with anyone. I think about you all the time. And, honestly, you’re the sanest person I know in this whole city.’

I felt her laugh against my cheek. ‘Well, you sure know how to sweet talk a gal, Mr Barrett. It’s a good thing I’m lying down, because I think my knees just got weak.’

‘Are you going to let me finish, or just go on with the criticism?’

‘Keep talking.’

‘I’ve never loved anyone before,’ I said. ‘Like this, I mean. So, this is all still new to me. But I think...that I love you too.’

‘Good,’ Sonia said, giving me a kiss on the cheek. ‘You should.’

We didn’t talk past that, but just held each other before my arm went numb and I had to shift her off me, with Sonia grumbling all the way. I didn’t know the time when I finally went to sleep, but I could hear her snoring gently beside me as I did.

When I opened my eyes, the room was still dark. I considered trying to get back to sleep, but quickly realised that I needed that bathroom. As quietly as I could, I slipped out of the bed, shivering as I left the covers and walked quickly to and, a minute later, from the bathroom.

As I climbed back into bed, careful not to disturb the still-sleeping Sonia. My hand brushed my phone case, and I hesitated, glancing at the dark shape of the girl next to me. She certainly seemed to be in a deep sleep, although I’d been fooled before.

The hell with it. Thousands of miles away, the history of the world was happening *right now*. The least I could do was be able to say that I’d almost sort of practically been there.

I flipped the case open, blinking as the light from the phone screen hit my eyes. I lowered the brightness, opening the internet and beginning to type. The keys clicked, and I switched the sound off, checking that Sonia hadn’t moved yet.

I typed in the words ‘presidential election 2016’; the auto-finish function appeared after the letter ‘P’, which I took as a bad sign. The first result was from the Telegraph, which probably wasn’t much better, but I opened it up anyway and stared at the screen, trying to make my four-in-the-morning brain power understand what I was even seeing.

Next to me I felt Sonia turn over, and then raise her head, squinting at me. ‘You’re not looking at the news, are you?’

I considered my options. The only believable lies involved either a family emergency or a sudden and desperate need to watch pornography, and I doubted either story would pass muster.

‘Couldn’t resist,’ I said. ‘Sorry.’

Sonia snorted, moving closer to me. ‘Can you switch the light off? It’s waking me up too much.’

I shut the phone cover, placing the mobile back onto my bedside cabinet. ‘Sorry.’

She put an arm over my chest, letting her head lie on my shoulder. For a few moments, I thought that she’d dropped off again, but then she asked, ‘So, go on. What’s happening out there?’

‘You don’t want it to be a surprise?’

‘Tom.’ It was amazing how she could go from sleepily sympathetic to just-as-sleepily stern in the blink of an eye.

‘It’s Trump,’ I said. ‘By about ten points. Still a while to go.’

Sonia didn’t say anything. She’d not tensed up or gasped or anything; she’d just gone quiet at the news.

Finally, she said, ‘Fuck.’

‘None of the really big states are in,’ I said, not sure which of us I was trying to reassure. ‘Florida’s still counting, and there’s Utah, Arizona...’

‘Tom, I know,’ she said, yawning. ‘I’m not making any predictions. I think the best thing would be to go to sleep.’

‘Sure.’ I let my hand run over her arm, taking her hand when I reached it. She gave it a squeeze, then rearranged her position. Before long, I heard her breathing deepen and stretch out. She’d gone back to sleep.

I stayed awake for a while after that, as much as I’d have liked to join her. She might not be making any predictions, but in my head I felt as though I could already see the next few hours playing out. Trump, I was now sure, would triumph. Something about it, now, in this dark bedroom, seemed inevitable: the same notion which had been nothing but a joke for months now. How, I wondered, could I not have considered it as a possibility before now? Had it truly seemed that unlikely, in the face of all of the articles, opinion pieces and scandals? Following Brexit, and with us still in 2016?

My exhaustion almost seemed to seep out of me, forced out by cold panic. Donald Trump as president. What had once seemed comical was now horrifying in its near-certainty. The man who had called climate change a hoax, who had asked why

America didn't use its nuclear arsenal, who had relied on hatred and fear of the other to build and maintain his support.

How long could it last, I thought. Politics was one of those institutions, like money or society, which worked right up until people stopped playing along. Was Donald Trump that point? Because I couldn't imagine a ruder awakening from the dream we'd obediently been taking part in. How long until his peculiar brand of insanity pushed the world over the brink?

Would we even be here a year from now, or would the first foreign policy dispute signal the beginning of the end for human life on planet Earth? Would his disregard for mankind's effect on the world rush us into the manmade apocalypse we were already stepping toward? At what point would cooler heads prevail and an absolute authority figure step in to break us out of this mad dream?

It wouldn't, I realised. Short of an assassination, there'd be relatively little stopping the man from ruining us all. And who'd assassinate a man if it meant allowing Mike Pence, a pro-life, fiscal conservative with a demonstrated streak of homophobia, to take the reins? Anyone standing on the grassy knoll had best keep the gun fully loaded.

I twisted and turned on the bed, suddenly uncomfortable. In my head, the nukes soared through the sky, calling thousands more into the air. Plants and animals died, passing out of existence, through endangerment and into extinction. Hurricanes and tsunamis battered the coast; forest fires roared rampant; people died of thirst or froze to death.

History, as I'd naively thought to myself minutes ago, was being made.

Sonia caught her breath. I stiffened, on the verge of checking on her, but then her next breath came, and she kept breathing.

Suddenly, I felt guilty. I was lying here, wondering about the state of the planet, when next to me was a girl whom I'd told I loved: a prime example of the people Trump's rhetoric had been blasted towards. How must she feel right now, even if she was still holding out hope of a Clinton victory? So far, Trump was winning through a campaign based heavily in hatred. He'd been compared to Adolf Hitler enough times that I'd taken at least some notice, and now this man might be well on the way to becoming the leader of the United States of America, providing his base with a new target: a new enemy to unite those who had flocked to Trump's banners.

My chest felt tight, and suddenly I wanted to throw myself out of bed and...what? Hug Sonia to me? Tell her that I didn't know how I was supposed to know if I loved her; that I'd have said anything if it meant not disappointing her?

I wanted to run in traffic; I wanted to call in a bomb threat at Parliament; I wanted to fuck Sonia on Julian's desk. Nothing mattered anymore, at least not to me.

With an effort, I dragged my mind from where it felt like it was hovering, feet above me, and made myself think clearly. Donald Trump was not the president. Donald Trump was not even president-elect; the election itself wasn't even over. There was time. Clinton might pull back. No matter how I personally felt, it didn't matter. Feelings weren't facts.

Even if Trump did win, then surely the gravity of the office and his situation would force him to confront reality more than he had done until now. Or, failing that, then mustn't he be too narcissistic to allow himself to die in a nuclear strike, showing that he was just as human as the rest of us?

I had to hope, or I knew I'd be lying there, staring at the ceiling, until it was time to get up. And that was just whilst I had to stay in bed and try not to wake Sonia again.

That made me smile just a little. In the face of annihilation by either mushroom clouds or Mother Earth, I was still not mad enough with fear that I was willing to risk the wrath of Sonia Malik denied sleep.

All I could do, I realised, was stay quiet and hope I dropped off myself. I closed my eyes, started breathing slowly, and began counting warheads.

\* \* \*

When I did wake up, I turned onto my side. Sonia's eyes were shut, but they opened calmly when I shifted.

'Morning,' I said.

'Hey.' She seemed composed, and I guessed she'd been awake for a while. I also guessed that her tranquillity was more façade than real; it was possible to spot if she was bottling something up.

'I don't suppose you —'

She shook her head. 'I figured we should look together. This time.' The emphasis on her last two words made me smile, even though the fear of a few hours ago was already creeping back into my head.



I looked at her for a second, and then realised that she was waiting for me. With a sigh, I reached out behind me, picking up the phone. It was a little after half past seven; breakfast was probably going to be a rush.

I opened the page I'd been looking at last night, refreshing it.

Beside me, Sonia moved closer, as if to get a better look.

'It's him,' I heard myself say. 'It's...Trump. He's going to be president.'

Sonia said, 'Fuck.'

I scrolled through the article, mutely taking in details. 'Looks like it only just happened: last half an hour or so. But...yeah, it's certain.'

Sonia didn't reply this time. I turned to look at her. She was lying on her back, looking calmly up at the ceiling. Her expression was one of curiosity, as though she was trying to understand something she could see written there.

'Are you...Sonia, are you alright?'

'What?' she asked, in a distant voice. 'You mean right now, like am I ill or something? Or more like "some guy just got elected president even though he said he was going to throw out all the Muslims and feels like it's alright to talk about groping women"? That kind of alright?'

I could practically feel the brittleness in her voice. I reached an arm over her, holding her. She didn't move into my embrace as she had last night, but she let me hold her, enduring it.

'It won't be as bad as it's been hyped up to be,' I started, feeling that some kind of response was expected. 'He'll never be able to do anything like he's been talking about.'

'The things he's been talking about are why he's there now,' she said. 'Or people weren't bothered enough by them to not vote for him. And you know, neither option feels good.'

I debated trying to say something else. When Sonia was in one of her rare low moments, there wasn't much anyone could say that could make it any better; the smartest thing to do was keep your head down and not try to fill the silence. On the other hand, being someone's romantic partner came with some expectations along with it, and I couldn't reconcile myself to just staying quiet and letting her work through it herself.

After a few seconds, I decided to go with what felt right rather than safe and reached for her hand. Again, without any enthusiasm, she let me take it, still saying nothing. I held it in mine for a while, trying to arrange the words in my head as best as I could.

‘It’s going to be alright,’ I said. This was hardly brilliant, and I was far from sure about it. Even in the harsh light of day, my waking nightmares of nuclear bombs and a burning Earth seemed all too real. Still, what was I going to say, right now? ‘Sonia, things are going to be alright.’

She looked at me, giving my hand a slight squeeze. Her mouth twitched into a smile: small, and terribly sad. ‘Is it?’ she asked, softly.

I was on the verge of saying ‘yes’ before I could even think straight. The way Sonia was looking at me, I doubted I’d be able to convince her. Better, then, to stick to the truth.

‘I’m a little scared,’ I admitted. ‘And I don’t know what’s going to happen. I don’t think anyone does right now. But I *don’t* think that things are going to go insane. He’s not going to

be able to put all Muslims on a list, or anything like that. People are already comparing the guy to Hitler; you think he’s going to want that kind of scandal? Or the Republican Party’d let him do it? It’s never going to happen.’

Sonia sighed. ‘That’s not it.’

‘Then tell me.’

She was quiet for a long time: long enough that I thought she wasn’t going to bother answering. But a second before I was about to say something else, she said, ‘We just had the referendum, and no matter what you want to say about everything people talked about that, a lot of people voted to kick the immigrants out. Or the foreigners, or the brown people or...fucking whoever they didn’t like the look of. And now...now Trump’s been saying the exact same kind of shit for months now: over a year. And even if people didn’t agree with him, or they said that it wasn’t what they cared about, they didn’t say no. They compromised on it, because it didn’t have anything to do with them, and they were willing to throw people under the bus to get what they wanted. And if my family had decided to move there instead of here, then I’d be one of those people. Right now. Because that’s what I am to some people, Tom. I’m a political talking point; I’m the big bogeyman they can scare people into the polls with. And apparently they scared people really well.’

‘It won’t have been that,’ I tried, lamely. ‘Not for everyone.’

‘For enough of them.’ Sonia sighed again, and then seemed to shake herself. ‘Sorry. I wasn’t trying to get at you. This is just...well, it’s going to take some getting used to.’

‘I understand,’ I said. She gave me a look which suggested she didn’t believe me, but she didn’t comment. Instead, all she did was yawn and sit up.

‘Better get ready,’ she said, trying to force a more business-like tone into her voice. ‘Unlike you, I don’t have a free day ahead of me.’

‘Not my fault my boss is dramatic,’ I said, starting to move out of bed too. ‘Would be a little weird if I showed up to just sit in his office.’

‘It would be,’ she admitted, stripping off her pyjamas and putting on one of the two bathrobes hanging from the door. I watched, distracted enough by this to not reply. Sonia noticed, giving me an exasperated look before a reluctant smile replaced it. ‘Men,’ she said. ‘Only one thing on your mind.’

‘Three things,’ I said. ‘Climate change, nuclear holocaust and you without clothes on. Not in that order.’

‘Good to know,’ she commented, archly. ‘Well, when you’ve picked your jaw up off floor, we should get a shower.’

‘You get one,’ I said. ‘I’ll fix you breakfast.’

She glanced at the watch. ‘That’s sweet, but I won’t have time. I’m probably going to be late already.’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘Breakfast to go. You get ready; let me handle the food.’

She shrugged and left the room. Once she was gone, I sighed. I was trying to raise her spirits any way I could, but I doubted I’d be able to. She’d taken the news pretty hard: hard enough that papering over her unhappiness wouldn’t be enough. It wasn’t just that I wanted the two of us to not spend our time moping about politics; I wanted her to be happy, without any ulterior motive. But finding out how seemed like it was going to be difficult.

Well, I had a day off with nothing better to think about.

I dragged myself the rest of the way out of bed, shivering as the chill air of the flat hit me; I still hadn’t adjusted the heating after the clocks had gone back. I told myself to fix it once I’d cobbled a breakfast together, but I’d probably just forget again. It seemed likely enough.

When I made it to the kitchen, I got to work frying some bacon and sausages. Sonia was a small girl, but she had a terrifying appetite, something that was even more

pronounced when she was unhappy. Once the meat was cooked, along with some eggs that I'd scrambled to go with it, I doled it out into two tortilla wraps, adding some ketchup before sealing them up. If there was a food that could put a smile back on your face, with the slight risk of a heart attack on the side, then this was that food.

The water turned off, and a few seconds later, Sonia emerged from the bathroom, along with a cloud of steam. She looked slightly less despondent, and she perked up even more when she saw what I'd managed to create.

'Jesus,' she said. 'If politics gets any more screwed up, I really will end up spherical.' She kissed me on the cheek, giving my arm a squeeze as she did so. 'Thanks, you,' she added. 'Seriously: I need something like this.'

'Well, don't eat a massive lunch,' I said, wrapping one of the breakfast burritos in tinfoil. 'Dinner tonight, remember?'

She rolled her eyes. 'Dinner with Julian. How could I forget?'

'Not just Julian,' I said. 'Uncle Andrew too.'

'I love your uncle,' she said. 'He's a really sweet guy.'

I knew what she meant, but the picture of my uncle and the words 'really sweet guy' were a discomfoting combination. Still, I didn't argue. Sonia, with all the determination and scrappiness she'd displayed since we'd met, was clawing her way back towards everyday life.

She nodded to the shower. 'If you hurry, you could shower up and we could go into town together.'

'Yes,' I said. 'But if I don't hurry, then I get to go back to bed, eat this really unhealthy breakfast and then watch cartoons until the world doesn't seem like such a terrible place after all.'

'Rude,' she said. 'Fine: stay here and enjoy being alone with your thoughts.' She tossed her hair as she turned away, dramatically enough to let me know that she wasn't being serious. I grinned, following her towards the bedroom.

When I joined her in there, she was out of the robe, pulling on her underwear. 'You know, you were right,' she said, as I watched. 'We should head into town early tonight. Have a drink somewhere else before meeting them.'

'Planning on taking advantage of me?' I asked.

She threw her robe at me; it hit me in the face. 'Seeing as how the world's going to hell,' she said, 'I thought that we may as well drink as much as we can and enjoy

ourselves as much as possible. Plus, I figure I might want to go into this less than a hundred percent sober. Call it a premonition.'

I shrugged. 'Sounds fair enough to me. So, Alvino's again? Seeing as how we could have gone there last night and it wouldn't have changed anything?'

'Sure.' Sonia pulled on her dress, and then motioned for me to zip her up. I pushed myself up off the bed again, pulling the zip up to her neck. 'It's not far from the restaurant. And the worst thing in the world has already happened anyway.'

'There is that,' I admitted, leaning forward to kiss her gently on the cheek. She smiled again, pushing me gently away before checking her hair.

'Alright, that's me,' she said. 'I'd best try to get there on time, seeing as how you're not even coming with me.'

'Don't forget your breakfast.'

'Wouldn't dream of it.' She dashed out of the room, coming back with her coat, her bag and her breakfast. She stopped to give me a kiss on her way back. 'Meet you at the bar at six?'

I nodded. 'Enough time to give you an alcohol cushion. Sure.'

'That's what I was thinking. Have a good day, lazy.'

'I'll try.'

I watched her leave, and then shivered again. With a sigh, I moved into the kitchen, picking up my breakfast and settling myself down on the sofa to tuck in.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I spent most of the day on the internet, pausing every so often in an always-doomed attempt to find a distraction. I resisted the urge to start drinking, assuming that there would be plenty of opportunities for that over dinner. It was important, I thought, not to panic. It would be best to take a good look at the situation, try to understand it from every aspect and then, possibly, to panic.

As far as I could tell, America and most of the world were reeling as much as I was. Certainly, there were online voices raised in celebration, most of them apparently genuine. In fact, there were so many of them that not for the first time I wondered if they had really had some kind of point. After all, you couldn't elect a man to become president solely on a campaign of hatred and out of desire for the world's biggest practical joke.

I was trying my best not to recoil from the result as I had the EU referendum. That had been a shattering blow to my perception of the world and how it worked, and I didn't want to be caught off-guard a second time. Still, it was a difficult ask. I was even less familiar with the lives and struggles of Americans than I was of most of the people in Britain, and I supposed that there might be some reason or logic why so much of the country had put their faith in a man like Donald Trump.

Had Hillary Clinton been particularly untrustworthy? Had the Democrats overlooked so many people that it had led to this? Were Trump or the Republican Party going to have the solution to the working-class' woes? I couldn't say; I was focused mainly on not making any snap judgements. I was remembering my family's attitudes at the party regarding the referendum: how they'd made up their minds and had no plans of changing their view or even thinking about it again. The last thing I wanted was to follow suit.

But what Sonia had said whilst we'd been in bed kept coming back to me: *even if people didn't agree with him, or they said that it wasn't what they cared about, they didn't say no*. It would be nice to believe that not everyone who'd voted for now-President-elect Trump had done so out of a desire to give whatever community they might fear or hate what for. In fact, I believed that myself. But as Sonia had said, they'd not let that change their minds about him.

Aside from the people who seemed perfectly happy to move a reality television star into the White House, there were plenty of other opinions. Some were blaming the

FBI, or WikiLeaks, or Russia, or Jill Stein, or Bernie Sanders, or men, or white people. Not a lot of people, least of all the Democratic Party, were blaming themselves. Hillary Clinton and her team were under fire both from those on the left who saw this as her failure and from those on the right who wanted her executed for treason.

Plenty of people were afraid that this was our first decisive step towards the end of the world. This was in a small way comforting, because it meant that I wasn't some mad paranoiac. On the other hand, I thought that I'd prefer to be slightly insane than cynically realistic when it came to my views on the apocalypse.

Journalists, brought up short by what had taken place, were aiming their guns at every publication but the one which paid their salary, decrying a lack of integrity regarding the election. Everyone, it seemed, had done it wrong except them, even if they all had been doing the same thing.

There were people telling us that insulting Trump voters had brought this upon us. There were others who firmly believed that anyone supporting Trump deserved to be verbally, if not physically, crucified. Some were taking what pleasure they could in the idea that those who had voted for him would likely suffer the most, where more were saying that we needed to pull together so as not to let this happen again. People were insisting that we needed to give the new president-elect a chance, whereas many took the view that the first seventy years of a person's life was a far better chance than anyone typically got. There were those who believed that it was only a matter of time before the upcoming president was impeached by his own party, whilst many believed that the Republicans, as they had for the majority of his campaign, would meekly fall into line. A fair few people seemed to think that with a Republican president plus a majority in the Senate and in Congress, America and the world would finally start to see real, effective change.

Many others agreed with this, although they couldn't see why the first group was happy about it.

The sheer volume of opinions and takes on what had happened was staggering. The day before, it seemed that all of America had gathered on either side of a battlefield, screaming insults and demanding that their opponents submit to their reasoning. Now one side remained intact and thoroughly jubilant, whilst the other had descended into bloody infighting.

After a few hours, I shut the laptop and booted up the PlayStation. When real life made this little sense, it seemed acceptable to no longer be a part of it. I spent most of

the afternoon playing an extremely violent videogame, driving dangerously through the streets of America, making frequent stops to gun down passers-by, pedestrians and cyclists. It didn't make me feel any better, which was probably a positive sign for my mental health, though it did stop me from feverishly hunting for the next depressing news story.

Finally, after a quick glance at the clock, I forced myself up from the sofa I'd spent the day on, getting myself ready for the evening. After showering, shaving, and wearing something that wasn't pyjamas, I looked and felt a little better. Presentable and dressed up like I was, this could have been any other day, rather than one which I had a feeling would end up in future history textbooks.

A bus pulled up to the stop as I reached it, which gave my spirits another boost. I was willing to see luck or a positive message in anything right now, and I continued that policy when the bus driver didn't make a sarcastic comment about me trying to pay my fare with a twenty-pound note. My change gave me my first ever new five-pound note as well and I considered myself, cautiously, to be on a roll.

I reached the bar just before six, but Sonia had beaten me there. She looked stunning, wearing a black dress which, despite being conservative enough that even my mother couldn't pass comment, sent the less-reputable parts of my imagination into overdrive. She greeted me with a kiss, accompanied by an elaborate cocktail.

'To say thanks for breakfast,' she said, as we sat down. 'That was very sweet. What did you get up to today?'

I tried to make my eight hours of scanning the comment sections of news websites and shooting virtual cyclists with a flare gun sound far more productive than it was and was met with a predictable and unforgiving scepticism. I inquired about her own day, giving her the satisfaction of proving, with what might have been a prepared speech, that she was the harder-working and more career-driven one in our relationship. I'd have argued about that, but being able to make this point seemed to keep her happy. Besides, when you've spent three hours lying on a rooftop, searching through a rifle scope for any sign of a bicycle, you lose your right to some opinions.

The cocktail was both refreshing and alcoholic, and we were soon holding hands, dissecting any gossip that Sonia had heard and even laughing at certain points. Losing herself in her work, it seemed, had been extremely helpful.

Our next drink was a whisky concoction which styled itself as the 'Beam Me Up'. It was our duty, we felt, to order it, on the basis that living long and prospering had



just become a great deal less likely. Sonia insisted on paying for that too, over my objections.

‘The breakfast wasn’t that good,’ I protested.

She gave me a kiss, on the lips this time, before pulling herself out of my grip. ‘It’s not just about the breakfast,’ she said. ‘Back in a minute.’

I sat back in my chair, determinedly not thinking about what might be happening in America. They’d had a night and some of the morning to get used to the news, and that seemed like enough time to get a few protests and perhaps a riot together. I resisted the urge to check the news; I was trying to keep off the topic as much as I possibly could right now, seeing as how Julian probably wasn’t going to be able to shut up about it.

Sonia came back, depositing two small glasses stuffed full of ice and liquor onto the table. Halfway through my first sip, I realised that this probably should be our last drink, and only because I’d already started drinking it.

Before long Sonia’s eyes had taken on a slightly glassy look, and I hoped that some very expensive food would smack some sobriety back into the pair of us. Uncle Andrew might like to feed me Welsh whisky, and Julian apparently believed that both I and everyone else in the world possessed his own impressive tolerance for alcohol, but there was such a thing as acting like a professional, whether in my role as protégé or nephew.

I was about to suggest ordering some water when Sonia leaned herself against me, more companionably than drunkenly. ‘I’ve got some news,’ she said.

‘Is it about the United States presidential election, because I might have beaten you to it.’

‘Nope,’ she said, taking another drink. ‘I told Mum and Dad about you.’

That stopped me. Once it had finished stopping me, it made me have a long drink of the Beam Me Up.

‘I see,’ I said, carefully. ‘And...how did that go?’

‘Not great,’ Sonia admitted. There was a cheerful note in her voice, at odds with any other conversation we’d had about her parents. At least this explained why she was paying for the drinks. ‘Better than doing it in person, I guess. Not easy to hang up on someone when they’re in the room with you.’

‘Not happy, then?’

‘I’d say more...angry?’ she said. ‘Oh, and disappointed. More disappointed. Well, *acting* disappointed anyway, because they think that works better than being angry.’

I nodded. Most parents resorted to that eventually. Mum, being of the mercenary persuasion, had a tendency to go straight to blackmail, but that was Mrs Barrett for you.

‘They want me stop seeing you,’ she said, still in that blasé, jaunty tone of voice. ‘They were pretty definite on that, actually. Very, if I’m honest.’

I took a breath. The last thing I wanted to do now was to say what I genuinely thought about Sonia’s parents, or anyone who thought that it was their child’s responsibility to treat their parents’ word as law and their culture’s traditions as if they were the Ten Commandments. I didn’t now, or in the foreseeable future, want to have that fight.

When I felt like I was going to be able to say something which didn’t include the word ‘dickheads’, I exhaled, looking at Sonia. ‘What did you say to that?’

‘I said that I wasn’t,’ she said, her happiness now very apparent. ‘I told them that I could make my own decisions and do what I wanted, and that they could either deal with that or not, because I wasn’t going to change my mind.’

I’d assumed that it had been something like that. She’d have hardly been so cheerful if she was going to be heading back to Ireland tomorrow. Still, the news was unexpected.

I put my arm around her, pulling her close to me, and she snuggled up against me. ‘I’m...well, I’m amazed,’ I said. ‘That was a big step.’

Sonia nodded, smiling in a satisfied sort of way. ‘I was going to have to have this conversation eventually,’ she said. ‘If not about you, then about something else. And, seeing as how we said the L-word last night, and as apparently the world might end a lot sooner than we thought, I figured that my parents acting disappointed wasn’t really anything to be scared of.’

‘Still though,’ I said. ‘I’m impressed.’

‘You should be,’ Sonia sighed, reaching for her drink again. ‘I’m an impressive kinda gal, Mr Barrett.’

‘You are indeed.’ I had a lot of questions, most of which I knew were probably better off not asked. Part of me – the most cynical part – thought that it was incredible that someone could have this much trouble not listening to their parents. I’d spent a good portion of my teenage and adult life not listening to mine and didn’t have any

real scars to show for it. But I'd been raised by those same parents I'd occasionally defied, and that had probably had something to do with the ease with which I did so.

I kept quiet about that, too. Sonia seemed to be very pleased with herself, her act of self-determination buoying her spirits from the point they'd plummeted to this morning. I didn't want to be the one who punctured them. I had an ominous feeling that the rest of the evening might well take care of that for me.

Eventually we agreed that it was time for us to go. Sonia downed the remaining half of her glass in a quick, fluid movement; I sipped mine quickly but with more restraint. If there was one thing which could be guaranteed by Julian and Uncle Andrew sitting at the same dinner table, it was that we were about to face an ungodly amount of alcohol.

The restaurant was barely a street away, and with the turn of a corner and a cross of the road, we found ourselves standing outside the cheerfully-lit steakhouse where we'd arranged to meet both my mentor and my uncle.

We moved inside, looking around the expensive interior. Unlike Uncle Andrew, who could fade into the background in an otherwise-unoccupied room, Julian was somehow instantly recognisable. I'd never been sure what it was about him. He was handsome enough, probably a bit more groomed than most people and never seemed to wear a suit that wasn't tailored, but even that shouldn't have made him so noticeable. Maybe it was just me. I could spot Sonia across a crowded shopping centre as well, and I seemed to be splitting my time equally between the two of them.

I couldn't see Julian, and so assumed that he wasn't there. But Uncle Andrew was present, sitting in an armchair with a glass of red wine in his hand and, despite the comfort of his surroundings, still managed to appear slightly ill-at-ease. There was a second glass of wine at the table, meaning that Julian must be somewhere close by.

Uncle Andrew raised his glass of red wine in greeting as we approached and then stood as if to receive us, shaking both mine and Sonia's hands. With Sonia, he seemed to clasp it a little tightly, and gave what almost seemed to be a searching look.

'Good evening, both of you,' he said. 'I'm glad that you were able to force yourself out after the morning's news.'

Sonia smiled at him. 'I think the promise of a steak dinner made recovery a little easier.'

My uncle gave her a smile in return. ‘Glad that I can help. Our table’s ready, but the manager is very happy for us to have a drink here before we move over. What can I get you?’

We both opted for a glass of wine, along with a water. As the waiter walked away, Uncle Andrew leaned forward, the movement almost conspiratorial.

‘I think you best know,’ he said, lowering his voice, ‘that Julian...’ He hesitated, thinking through the next few words. After a moment, he went on, ‘Julian has had some unfortunate news today. It seems that, somehow, news of how he came to be in Newcastle has reached one of the MPs from here: Ken Johnson. He and Julian have...disagreements over the direction the region should be heading in; he’s very opposed to Julian’s social housing scheme and has made it quite clear that if Julian keeps pushing for it, he’ll make sure that the media knows why he left Westminster.’ He took a sip of his wine, looking at mine and Sonia’s startled faces. ‘He knows that this is the end of his plan. He’s taking it as well as I could hope for, but if we could keep his spirits up as much as possible...?’

Still in shock, Sonia and I nodded. I was still trying to get my head around it. I couldn’t imagine what Julian must be thinking, whether or not Uncle Andrew thought that he was handling it well. Once again, something Julian had cared and worked passionately for had been snatched away from him. I wondered if he’d be able to bounce back from this, or if this would finally be the end of his enthusiasm.

There wasn’t a lot of time to process it, either. As the waiter ferried our drinks over, Julian descended the staircase and walked over to where we sat. He sank down in his chair, scooping up his half-empty glass as he did so, and looked at me.

‘Surprised?’ he asked.

For a moment, I wondered if he was talking about what Uncle Andrew had just told me. Then, belatedly, I remembered what else had been going on. ‘A bit,’ I admitted. ‘Got a little hint at four o’clock in the morning.’

Julian nodded, giving me a wan smile. ‘Then I knew rather earlier than you, I think,’ he said, raising a hand to his mouth to stifle a yawn. ‘Been surviving on naps and coffee since eight.’ He replaced the hand with his glass, drinking more of his wine. I found myself watching him as he did so. He didn’t seem drunk, which was something. But I couldn’t help but regard him now as something fragile, which might at any moment shatter. Or explode.

‘I suppose that the subject’s unavoidable,’ Uncle Andrew said, casting a glance at Julian, ‘but we shouldn’t let it ruin a nice meal. Besides,’ he said, now addressing me, ‘if you’re anything like your mother then this won’t have been your first drink of the evening.’

I had to smile. ‘We managed to hold off until six, if that means anything.’

‘Ah,’ he said. ‘A little more well-behaved than your mother, then.’ That even got a faint grin from Julian, showing two rows of purple-stained teeth. ‘Well, now that we’re all here and you have your drinks,’ Uncle Andrew went on, lifting his glass to a measured height, ‘it seems only fair to propose a toast to American politics: now far more interesting than I think any of us ever expected or wanted.’

Sonia laughed, taking a sip of her own wine. ‘2016 has been a hell of a year,’ she said. ‘Still, at least it’s almost over.’

‘I’m sure we’ll remember it a lot more kindly when 2017’s done with us,’ Julian said, who had not raised his glass with ours. ‘Still, the world’s withstood worse than President Trump. Although what he might end up doing whilst in the job’s anyone’s guess.’

‘He’s certainly the embodiment of the worst people tend to think about America,’ Andrew said, thoughtfully. ‘Loud, boasting, ill-mannered, inconsiderate.’

‘Racist,’ Sonia put in, her voice casual.

‘Sexist,’ I added, feeling that I may as well.

‘Or at least he seems to want people to think he is,’ Julian said. ‘Which in a lot of ways is even worse. Farage has certainly cosied up to him, and we all know what he likes to say without actually saying it. I suppose when they make you leader of UKIP you get lessons in these things.’

‘The difference being, Trump just beat a Clinton to the White House, whereas Farage can’t get a seat in Parliament,’ Uncle Andrew said. I might have been imagining it, but it seemed to me as though there was a faint note of satisfaction in his voice. I’d never seen him take pleasure in someone else’s misery but, considering that Nigel Farage had been the foremost driving force behind the Leave vote, I suppose that there was some professional bad feeling there.

‘Doesn’t need to now,’ Julian shot back. ‘He’s best mates with the president-elect. What the hell’s May thinking, letting him run rings around her like this? Probably too concerned with the Snooper’s Charter. Which,’ he added, finishing his wine, ‘I notice

that the Opposition were happy to roll over for on request rather than...well, *opposing*.'

'If you're directing any of that criticism at me, Julian, then you're being extremely unfair,' Uncle Andrew said, still very calm. 'I voted against, you might have read, along with Dennis.'

Julian grunted. 'And the other two hundred and twenty-eight Labour MPs?'

'Most voted aye; some stayed at home. Welcome to politics, Julian. You might have realised by now that not everything goes to plan.'

'Oh? So there was a plan? What's the plan now?'

'There was a plan,' Andrew admitted. 'Then there was a referendum, and we voted to leave the European Union. So, then there was another plan. And Donald Trump became President of the United States. When we have our next plan, I imagine Marine Le Pen will be in control of France. And so, once again, we'll think of something. But if you're going to talk shop all evening, then I'd rather do so whilst we eat. Shall we?'

He stood, catching the eye of a passing waiter, who hurried over to us. We were shown to our table, on the edge of a balcony overlooking the ground floor. For a few minutes, silence settled over us as we scanned the menus. The advertised food certainly had Julian looking more cheerful, and even Uncle Andrew seemed enthusiastic at the range.

We were quickly ready to order, and soon the waiter had returned to us, taking down what seemed to be our every word. Uncle Andrew and Julian both decided on a sirloin, Julian adding a half-lobster to his with relish. I chose a rare fillet steak, satisfied with the chips which would accompany it. Sonia ordered the same.

Once the waiter had departed, the four of us lapsed back into silence. There was the feeling that we were all searching for something to talk about that was not politics. Unfortunately, this evening it seemed there was little chance of that. Even if Donald Trump hadn't just become the future President of the United States, and even if Julian hadn't just had his latest purpose crushed in front of him, most of the time the four of us talked to each other about politics. Sonia and I were at even more of a disadvantage: several drinks under and still caught off-guard by the news about Julian. Occasionally I glanced at Sonia, trying to read her mood. Whatever that mood was, it wasn't possible to tell. She had gone blank. All that she was showing was surface, and when she did that it wasn't easy to see past it.

We did our best to keep the conversation going, and with Uncle Andrew helping and Julian apparently happy to take part it managed to not be too awkward. Whilst politics was what most of us had in common, after a few hesitant attempts we were able to find some other mutual interests, finally getting some mileage out of a discussion on cinema. We all enjoyed different genres, which added some liveliness to the exchange: Julian enjoyed either horror movies or political thrillers; Sonia preferred emotional dramas or foreign movies; I was personally a fan of crime films, and Uncle Andrew had a hitherto unsuspected regard for romantic comedies.

Between courses, Sonia revealed to both Julian and Andrew what she had told me only an hour or so ago: that her parents now knew about the two of us. Under the table, I gave her hand a squeeze, both for moral support and out of general gratitude and affection.

Uncle Andrew was sympathetic, citing a similar case which had happened to a friend of his some time ago. That friend was, he told us, now happily married to the girl in question, although Uncle Andrew assured us that he didn't mean to put us under any pressure. Julian, who had fallen a little silent upon first hearing the news, congratulated Sonia on taking the step she had, whilst commiserating with me on the unkindness of potential in-laws. I refrained from making any comment of my own, whilst Sonia thanked him politely.

'People have trouble letting go of their culture,' Julian said. 'They bring it with them and find a place for it in their new home. It takes time to adapt – sometimes generations – but almost all change is gradual. It just seems to take longer when it's the one you're waiting for.'

'And when people are trying to stop it,' Sonia agreed, and there was a bit more of an edge to her voice as she responded. 'There are quite a few people who've been making their feelings clear on that.' She glanced at Uncle Andrew. 'There was a demonstration in town, right after the referendum,' she said. 'Took me by surprise; I'd not seen one in person.'

My uncle nodded. 'I'm sorry you had to,' he said. 'The current political climate is making it all a lot easier: the Government and the other sections of the right get their scapegoats and cautionary tales, whilst Labour's busy playing at identity politics.'

'You don't approve, I take it?' Julian asked, innocently. He'd procured another glass of wine when we'd ordered and was making headway through it. I was simply

amazed at how quickly any conversation we started seemed to zip back towards politics as though conforming to some sort of criteria.

‘I think the lesson’s been made clear,’ Andrew was saying. ‘The only way making groups of people fight against each other is going to move us out of being in the Opposition is if the Lib Dems steal a march on us. All we’re accomplishing at the minute is infighting.’ He sounded uncharacteristically annoyed as he said this, and his hand had gripped hard over his water glass.

After a moment, he sighed. ‘That’s the trouble with being on the left,’ he said. ‘People are always so busy finding ways that you can be better. More progressive, more empathetic and more perfect. And if you don’t manage to reach whatever line they’ve managed to draw for you, then they hate you worse than any party which could exist on the right. Because then it’s not an attack to them: it’s a betrayal.’

Julian smiled. ‘It almost sounds as though you’re about to say that the right wing is more sensible.’

‘Moderates are more sensible, Julian. And right now, we don’t seem to have a lot of them to go around.’ Uncle Andrew looked at Julian for what might just have been a moment too long, although Julian didn’t give any appearance of having noticed.

But I hadn’t imagined it, if the deliberate two taps Sonia’s foot gave my ankle was any indication: she seemed to have made something of it too. There was a sense of tension over the table. It wasn’t obvious by any stretch, and there was certainly enough explanation for it after everything that had happened over the last twenty-four hours, but it was still there and showed no sign of dissipating.

In the slight pause that followed, Sonia took the initiative and manoeuvred the conversation towards the beauty and hidden gems of Newcastle and so onto far safer ground. Uncle Andrew, probably aware of her intention, joined in the discussion enthusiastically, asking questions in his role as the curious outsider, and Julian was also prone to just enough regional pride to make a sizeable contribution. I realised that, like Andrew, I was still something of an outsider to this place. Julian had had a connection with Newcastle for years and even Sonia, who’d not been up North for that much longer than I had, seemed to have an affinity for the city. I wondered for the first time what she’d gotten up to before we’d met. It was odd to picture her having drinks with other people – other men – free from all the political turmoil we were moving through.



I watched her face as she talked, telling Uncle Andrew and Julian about the best places to go for tea, and found myself smiling as I thought about the two of us. I remembered last night, when she'd told me that she loved me, and I'd not quite known what to say. Twenty-one hours later, it seemed silly to be confused about it.

Sonia saw me looking and gave me a quick smile which I returned. Again, under the table, I felt her take my hand and squeeze it.

Our main courses arrived, and we were spared any more attempts at conversation for a little while as we fell upon it. Alcohol and tension had put an edge on all of our appetites, and my fillet steak was the best I'd ever tasted. Any sense of Julian's thwarted ambitions was hidden as he sliced industrially at his sirloin, occasionally switching to his lobster with relish. Like most other occasions, a truly good meal managed to make the greater situation seem far less grim.

Once we'd all gotten past the first attack on our steaks, we began talking again. Fortunately, the quality of the food confined our discussion either to the meals in front of us and then, with a slightly sinister air, what all of us would choose for our last meal if the nukes all launched with a generous window of time to order, consume and appreciate. Even this proposal was met with some laughter, and we were soon discussing the merits and disadvantages of black pudding (Julian), gumbo (me), oysters (Andrew) and deep-fried Mars Bars (Sonia).

It was Julian who widened the hypothetical last meal to a choice of alcohols, which carried us right through to dessert. Sonia and Andrew had a lively disagreement about the etiquette for drinking a cocktail with dinner, and at what stage alcohol stopped augmenting a food's flavour and started to make it harder to taste.

Finally, after a three-way argument about the best whisky in the world (which briefly forced the *maître d'* to defend the good name of Laphroaig), we all sat in front of some form of coffee, feeling fuller, happier, and most definitely drunker. Part of my cheerfulness came from my relief at how smoothly the evening seemed to have gone. Julian and Sonia in the same room had been a worrying prospect even before the context in which the meal would take place had grown significantly darker. But even if it was mostly pretence, Julian was holding it together and Sonia was doing her best to keep the waters placid.

'So, I take it that things are getting serious,' Julian remarked. 'If you've told the parents, I mean.'

Sonia glanced at me, cheeks a little flushed as she smiled. ‘It does seem to be going that way, yes. I think political crises pushes people together.’

‘Couples, maybe,’ Julian admitted. ‘The huddled masses, a little less. That’s what led to all of...’ he waved a hand vaguely, ‘this.’ He thought for a moment. ‘So, what happens if it keeps getting serious and they keep saying no? Elopement?’

‘It’s probably a little early to start thinking about that,’ Uncle Andrew murmured. Even halfway through a black coffee, he was looking tired. ‘Although it would be a shocking end to 2016. I can’t imagine my sister approving of a runaway marriage.’

‘Andrew, I’ve never known your sister to approve of anything,’ Julian’s said. ‘She’s certainly never approved of me.’

‘And you would have been devastated if she had,’ replied Uncle Andrew, briefly laying a hand on Julian’s arm.

‘I think our mothers have that in common,’ Sonia said, the comment light-hearted. ‘But mine’s probably more stubborn.’

Uncle Andrew and I exchanged a brief, stoic look across the table, and said nothing.

‘Well, Amelia’d be glad to have a lawyer in the family,’ Julian went on. There was a fuzziness to his voice, I realised: something between a slur and a wobble. I wondered if Uncle Andrew had heard it, or Sonia. I didn’t sneak a glance to see if they had reacted; I was far from sober myself. ‘One of the few professions she *does* approve of.’ He glanced at my uncle and snorted. ‘Far more than she does of politicians, anyway.’

‘Julian,’ Uncle Andrew said, quietly.

‘She says that they’re all snakes,’ Julian went on, disregarding him. ‘They’ll say anything to gain an inch with you, and then stab you in the back.’ He knocked back what remained of his Ardbeg in a single movement before wiping a hand across his mouth. ‘I can’t say that I entirely disagree.’

‘Julian.’ This time, Uncle Andrew’s admonition was a little louder, but just as ignored.

‘You see,’ Julian said, looking at me and Sonia, ‘I’ve not been having a particularly good day, thanks to one certain politician: Ken Johnson.’ He focused on Sonia. ‘That’s your MP, isn’t it, Sonia?’

Sonia was, in general, a restrained character. You had to know her quite well to be able to read her moods through all the tiny, barely noticeable clues. I’d learned to, and it was obvious from the set of her jaw and the way her ears seemed to flatten

themselves back against her head that Sonia had stopped being a spectator to the evening's drama and was on the verge of becoming a participant.

I considered giving her a little kick under the table but couldn't face it. If she was going to get truly angry, then she'd be indiscriminate when it came to her aim.

'That's right,' she said, in a calm tone that was at odds with the hard look in her eye. She took a sip of her espresso, appearing to relish its bitterness. 'Me and thousands of others.'

'Thousands of others don't go to his surgeries,' Julian said. 'It seemed like the two of you know each other quite well.'

I glanced at Uncle Andrew; his expression was inscrutable. Sonia, meanwhile, was still looking at Julian, her face neutral. Finally, she said, 'If you're going to accuse me of something, Julian, then say it.'

The temperature felt like it had dropped about twenty degrees, freezing the second after that moment. I chanced a quick look at Julian, who's expression hadn't changed. I then looked at Uncle Andrew, catching him just hiding what might have been a wince. Whomever Ken Johnson had heard the story from, Sonia could only have received it from me or my uncle. I wondered if the two of us were about to get dragged into this.

After a moment, Julian gave a shrug and said, 'Well?'

Sonia shook her head. 'I don't know who told him, Julian. But whoever it was, they probably cared a lot more about what happens to you than I do.'

I caught the appealing look that Uncle Andrew shot me, but I didn't try to intervene; it wouldn't have accomplished anything. In a way, it seemed this had all been building for almost as long as the two of them had known each other and, if it was all about to erupt, then what better night for it? The world had gone mad. In the grand scheme of things, how much did this really matter?

There was silence between Julian and Sonia, although they maintained eye contact, neither one of them willing to look away. Uncle Andrew coughed, and motioned to the waiter that now was a fine time to bring the bill along.

Julian drank the rest of his coffee in a swift gulp. The gentle chink of the cup being placed upon its dainty saucer was like a sword being drawn. The entire time, he hadn't taken his eyes off Sonia.

'You don't like me very much, do you?'

My eyes widened; even Sonia looked a little taken aback. My uncle, however, had turned to Julian before he'd finished the sentence.

'Julian,' he said, 'that's enough. Stop.'

'No,' Sonia said, firmly. 'Go on, Julian. I'm curious. Do you think you're that likable? Because as far as I can tell, as soon as you don't get to be prominent or in charge of something, like in the Shadow Cabinet, or devolution, or your housing scheme, you think everyone needs to feel sorry for you and try to find you something else, so you go on feeling like you're doing something useful. Are people supposed to get something out of that, or are they just supposed to be glad that they're helping the great visionary, Julian Ashworth?'

Now it was Julian's turn to be surprised, but the alcohol and the day's bitterness seemed to drive him forward, not allowing for any indecision.

'You think it's so easy?' he asked her. 'You think it's fun, being in this position, watching all of this play out, not able to do anything and still *caring*?'

'I *know* it's not,' Sonia said. 'Because I'm doing the same thing myself, just like you. Just watching, not able to do anything about it. The difference is, you *were* in a position to do something, weren't you? Shadow Chancellor, right? But you fucked that up, and now you can pace around, acting all dramatic because everyone's doing it *wrong*, and *nobody* except you knows how anything should go, and how nobody's even *talking* to you anymore or listening to your amazing ideas.' She snorted, punctuating the sentence. 'But those people didn't lose their jobs because they hauled off and punched someone, did they? Because that's why you're here now, in charge of a whole city, acting like it's all beneath you: like it doesn't matter because we're not getting devolution and you're not going to be King in the North anymore. It's like you're not even aware that there are people out there, right now, who *rely* on you and the council: people living on the streets or who are going to die because they're not getting the support they need, while you're off trying to find ways to save money so you can have your big project that everyone will be able to be happy about and say what a great social conscience you have, because that's what really seems to matter to you, Julian.'

Julian was staring at her, either not willing or not able to muster up an answer to what she was saying. Sonia wasn't inclined to give him a chance. 'And if we're talking about either of us not liking the other one, then what about *you*? What did *I* ever do to make you mouth off about my parents to Tom all the time? What, was I some kind of

danger to your pet project?’ She gestured violently towards me. ‘Was I going to ruin Julian Ashworth two-point-oh? Corrupt him away from your own personal world view? Was he not supposed to be able to disagree? Was anything he did outside of politics some stupid waste of time? Because that’s what I’ve been getting from all of this, to be quite honest: I’m the stupid girl who’s distracting Tom away from watching you sulk and act like you’re so much cleverer than the rest of us; you were even looking at getting shot of my grad scheme because, what, you were *jealous*? And you know what? If you were *actually* as smart as you think you are and cared as much as you think you do, you could still have done something useful, but you never actually did, did you? You never even got my *fucking bins collected*.’

She stopped, and for a second seemed as though she was winding up to start a whole new tirade, but then shook her head. ‘Fuck this,’ she said. ‘I’m done.’ She stood up from the table, the motion a shock following the stillness. She looked at my uncle. ‘Andrew, I’m sorry; I just can’t right now.’ She turned to me, started to say something, but only shook her head.

Then she’d turned away and was gone.

I began to stand, intending to follow her out, but Julian’s head turned sharply towards me. ‘No,’ he said, his voice sharper than I’d ever heard it; I stopped, frozen in place by his tone. ‘Stay. I’m sure Andrew won’t object to an audience, even if he usually has these little talks in private.’ He looked at Uncle Andrew, his eyes fierce. ‘Go on,’ he said. ‘Say whatever it is you came here to say, or am I supposed to believe that this is just a social call?’

Uncle Andrew didn’t reply immediately. Instead, he looked at Julian for several moments, then clasped his hands on the table in front of him. ‘Before we get to that, Julian, let me first say that I think it would be a good idea if you were to apologise to that young lady.’

‘Apologise?’ Julian had said the word quietly enough, but there was a wildness to his face now: an energy that suggested he was keeping himself sat at the table rather than storming away only with a severe effort. ‘You want me to apologise for her torpedoing months of my work, handing my political future to Ken fucking Johnson? To hell with that. I’ve had my legs cut out from under me, and you want me to apologise for being frustrated about that?’

‘You don’t know that she told anybody anything,’ Uncle Andrew said. ‘You have no evidence, much less proof, and it would be stupid to accuse people of things in that position. You’re not thinking sensibly.’

Julian laughed, and there was a bitter edge to it. ‘*Thinking sensibly?* Why the hell should I be thinking sensibly? Do you see many other people here doing that? Do you think that there’s a lot of sense going around?’

‘None of that will be helped by accusing city council employees of leaking information, and I’d have thought that you were sensible enough to know *that*.’ The last syllable had contained more emotion than Uncle Andrew had conveyed over the entire rest of the evening. Possibly he’d intended it as a warning, but if that’s how Julian understood it, then it didn’t work.

He stood suddenly, glaring at the grey, non-descript man who looked back at him. ‘I can’t believe you can talk so calmly about this, about me, like that *matters*. Have you *seen* who they’ve just put in the fucking White House? You think *my* behaviour’s the issue here?’

‘Sit down, Julian.’ Uncle Andrew’s voice had regained its calm quality, and his gaze, directed at Julian, was steady. ‘I’m well aware of what’s happened in the United States, but I’m currently in no position to do anything about it. Neither does it excuse the behaviour of everybody else on the planet. And in *your* position, the last thing I should think you’d want to do is cause a scene.’

This, at last, seemed to reach Julian. He sank down into his chair, looking suspiciously at my uncle. ‘What do you mean, in my position? Something I should know?’

‘Now isn’t the best place —’

‘For God’s sake,’ Julian had almost growled the words. Again, his anger was so visceral, so *other* to what I had come to expect from him, that I didn’t feel as though I could move. More heads had turned to watch the show, though I don’t think Julian had even noticed. ‘Just answer the question. What’s happening?’

I assumed that Uncle Andrew would remain firm, or at least suggest that they go somewhere else to have the conversation. But all he did was sigh faintly before leaning forward, lowering his voice as though half the restaurant wasn’t looking our way.

‘This has all been a strain on you,’ he said, slightly quieter. ‘Some of us...’ He paused, then went on. ‘Some figures in the Party, and those closer to the regional

picture...they were thinking that it might be time for a step back from a public role. In light of...well, the general outlook moving forward.'

Julian must have known. His expression hadn't changed; the only difference was that his eyes had looked up from the table to gaze at Uncle Andrew.

'You're kicking me out.' It wasn't a question.

'It's nothing like that, Julian,' Uncle Andrew said. 'The situation is complicated, and it'll be more complicated with you in this position.'

'And did Johnson tell you that?'

'He didn't have to. This isn't anything to do with him; his concern was purely policy-based. Not that you've made things easy there either.' He leaned forward, continuing before Julian could say anything. 'Julian, this is about a range of factors. There aren't going to be any big projects you can get behind, do you understand? It will just be cuts and loss of funding and uncertainty. Would you want to be a part of that? We need a different person in the role as it stands; that's what this is about.'

Julian stared at him for a long moment, then said, 'You told her.'

Uncle Andrew took, or at least seemed to take, a second to understand what Julian had said. Then he shook his head slowly. 'Are you serious?'

'How else could she find out?' Julian said, voice raised. 'And that would clear up things for everyone, wouldn't it? Couldn't send it through the Party; couldn't trust a politician with it. But a friend of the family? Someone in the right constituency with the right contacts? That'd work just fine. Just a quiet word in the right ear, maybe a little nudge because this is Ken Johnson we're talking about, and there you have it. How nice. How neat.'

'That's ridiculous,' Uncle Andrew said, somewhat more force in his voice now. 'Utterly ridiculous. Are you suggesting that I would instruct a member of the public to stab you in the back? I'd like to think our friendship counted for more than that, Julian.'

Julian coloured, sitting quietly for a moment. Then he said, 'I want to talk to Jeremy.'

'Not now,' Uncle Andrew said. 'Not at the moment. Julian, he will tell you the exact same thing. I'm not acting independently.'

'You never did.' Julian seemed to consider something. 'I could refuse,' he said eventually. 'I could fight you on this. I know a few things that it might not be in, hah, the *public interest* to know.'

‘I’m sure you could.’ If there had been a trace of familiarity in Uncle Andrew’s voice before, it was gone now. ‘But I doubt that it would do much good, Julian. Or even that much bad. If you’d made such accusations after leaving national politics, you could have caused a great deal of trouble at a difficult time. But now? A former leader of the city council, only in the post for a year, going to the papers out of bitterness during the most turbulent political period of the age?’ He shook his head. ‘Maybe some people would listen to you, even believe you. But most wouldn’t be interested enough. And then the next news cycle would come along with some piece about Brexit or Trump, and they would move on. All we’d have to do would be to deny everything, and it would be another case of the left eating itself. Like we always do.’ He sat back in his chair, but his eyes remained on Julian. ‘Tom,’ he said, and I started. I’d felt certain that the pair of them had forgotten that I was at the table too. I looked at him; he was still watching Julian. ‘I think you should go and see if Sonia’s alright.’

It was as though his words had released me from the shock that was keeping me in my seat. I stood up and took off down the stairs without looking back.

When I reached the ground floor, I headed straight for the door, pushing through it so hard I almost knocked an elderly lady onto the pavement. Shouting an apology over my shoulder, I turned left and ran up the street, heading towards the town centre. As I dashed uphill, I thought about all the routes Sonia could take home and realised that she would be heading for the Metro station. I sped up, going as fast as I possibly could, already breathing hard.

I was on the verge of thinking that I must have gone the wrong way, that Sonia had either taken a different route or wasn’t going home, when I saw her, some way ahead. I didn’t have the breath to shout for her, so threw my energy into a last desperate sprint to reach her.

I managed to misjudge the distance between us and, unable to stop in time, was forced to throw myself aside at the last second. I struck her right shoulder, staggering off the pavement. She almost overbalanced herself, but she had already turned towards me by the time I’d righted myself, clutching her bag with a fist drawn back in readiness.

When she saw me, she dropped the hand, rolling her eyes in exasperation. ‘Christ, Tom. What, did Julian send you to bump me off?’



‘Just to bump into you,’ I managed, breathing heavily. ‘Sorry: couldn’t stop. I didn’t want you to leave by yourself.’

She looked sharply at me, as if not quite believing me, and then her shoulders drooped a little as her breathing got calmer.

‘I see,’ she said, evenly. ‘I don’t suppose Julian might have said anything after I left, did he?’

‘No. Just walked into the bathroom. Uncle Andrew said he’d handle him.’

‘Oh, so *Andrew* sent you out after me?’ she said, but there wasn’t any venom in her voice.

‘I came myself. I wanted to know that you were alright.’

Sonia shrugged, but seemed slightly mollified. ‘Better late than never, I suppose.’

I smiled at that, still winded from the run. ‘If it helps, seeing you yell at a city council leader for a whole minute was breath-taking.’

‘You’re not helping, Tom. I hope you realise that.’

I took a step towards her, holding her by her arms. She didn’t move closer, but she didn’t move away either. ‘I’m with you,’ I heard myself say. ‘You don’t have to worry about me having a split loyalty or anything. We love each other, don’t we?’

Sonia pushed a stray lock of hair out of her face. ‘Oh, we do, do we?’

This time I grinned. ‘I seem to remember a conversation along those lines.’

‘I don’t. You’d best remind me.’

I pulled her towards me, and she let me do it, tilting her head up so that I could kiss her lightly on the lips. ‘I love you,’ I said. I felt more sure about it this time, though whether this had come from practice or because I’d gotten used to the idea I couldn’t say.

Sonia seemed to consider me for a moment, and then gave me another kiss. ‘Then I guess I love you too.’ She looked down at her feet and then back up at me, a smile of her own breaking through her stoicism. ‘I’m glad you came running after me,’ she said. ‘Even if you did almost rugby tackle me.’

I wrapped her in a quick hug; her arms squeezed me surprisingly tightly before releasing me again. ‘Let’s go home,’ I said.

She snorted. ‘Screw that. After that display, I think I need a drink.’

I groaned, but it was mostly for show. I let Sonia grab my hand and start dragging me into the next portion of an already-bizarre night.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was some time before I saw Julian again. After the scene at the restaurant, Uncle Andrew had decided to intervene. The next day, before I was even half-awake, my phone had rung, rattling away on my bedside cabinet. I'd groaned, clumsily pulling it over to me by its charger cord.

'Hello?'

*'Tom. How are you? How's Sonia?'*

'What? Oh, fine. Yeah, she's fine.' I pushed myself up on my elbow, turning away from Sonia to reduce the risk of waking her. 'Sorry that everything went...well...'

*'It's fine, Tom. Julian knows that he wasn't acting appropriately.'* There was a stern note in Uncle Andrew's voice, and I wondered what had been said between the two of them after I'd left the restaurant. Something else I'd likely never find out. I didn't care much one way or the other.

'I see,' I said. 'Well...she's fine. We both are.' I dropped my voice slightly. 'I just think it'd be for the best if her and Julian didn't see much of each other. For a while.'

*'I thought the same thing. In fact, I was thinking that it might be better if you had some distance from Julian right now.'*

I sat up straighter, feeling far more awake now. 'What? But I didn't kick off or start anything. Did I?'

*'It's not that, Tom. And it's not because of Sonia.'* He sighed. *'Look, this is...this is difficult to say over the phone, but I'm already on the train. I'd meant to let you know yesterday evening, but...well.'*

But Donald Trump had become president-elect, and my girlfriend had had a blazing row with the leader of Newcastle City Council, who'd then been told he was being forced out. I assumed that was what Uncle Andrew meant by 'well'.

*'Anyway, after dinner, I thought it might be best if Julian and I had...a little talk. About his future.'*

'Okay,' I said, 'so...what happened? What's going to happen?'

*'He's going to announce his resignation.'*

Well, I was fully awake now. With a quick look at Sonia, I slid slowly out of bed, making my way as quietly as possible to the door. 'He agreed?'

*'It was a long conversation,'* Uncle Andrew said, sounding weary. *'But I think he saw how sensible it was eventually.'*

After a few more drinks or a few more threats, I assumed. It sounded like Sonia and I had missed out on a hell of a party, although it was probably for the best that she and Julian hadn't spent any more time in the same place. I slipped out into the hallway of my flat, leaning against the wall with the phone against my ear.

*'He's...well, he's not in the best shape now, Tom. And I know that this may sound a little on the callous side, but I think it might be for the best if perhaps you didn't see him.'*

'Right.'

*'For some time.'*

'How long?'

A sigh rustled through the phone. *'Tom, I can't tell you what to do. What I can do is tell you what would be the best way forward for you, right now.'*

'And what's that?'

*'If you take my advice, Tom, don't go into the office. I don't think that you should be close to Julian. He tends to get...dramatic.'*

That was a fair assessment, I supposed. Still, something about the whole situation seemed off.

'I'll stay home,' I said. 'I know...I know it's probably the right thing to do. But what about Julian? I mean...should he be left alone right now?'

*'He's not going to be,'* Uncle Andrew said, heavily. *'I'm going to be keeping an eye on him. As soon as he leaves, he's going to be coming back down South. We're going to look over his options. We just thought that things here would work out differently. It doesn't make us too different from the rest of the country, I suppose.'*

I took a moment before replying, allowing myself a few breaths. 'Alright,' I said. 'So, then...what am I going to do?' Visions of returning home to my mother and father were already swimming in front of my eyes and I shook myself, trying to clear my head.

Uncle Andrew also paused before responding. *'I'll be able to talk to you more in a couple of days. And I can talk to your mother: save you the trouble.'*

'Thanks,' I said, meaning it. Too much had happened recently to add a conversation with Mum to it.

*'But for the minute,'* my uncle went on, *'I would consider myself on holiday. I'm sorry, Tom; I'm really trying to keep a lot of plates spinning –'*

'No, no, of course,' I said, quickly. 'Absolutely. Thanks for the warning.'

There was a brief silence, and then: *‘Sonia is alright, isn’t she?’*

I nodded, stifling a yawn. ‘She wanted a few drinks afterwards, but we’re both fine. She hasn’t woken up yet, but she seemed okay last night. Eventually.’

‘*Mmm.*’ Uncle Andrew didn’t sound altogether convinced. ‘*Just...well, make sure she is okay, Tom.*’

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘Sure, I’ll do that. And...I guess make sure that Julian is too.’

Uncle Andrew gave a tired chuckle. I’d never heard him laugh before; it was a surprisingly pleasant sound. ‘*I’ll do that,*’ he said. ‘*And I’ll keep in touch. Look after yourself, Tom.*’

‘You too,’ I said. ‘Thanks again.’

The line went dead. I looked at the phone, as if expecting it to give me some more advice about what to do. It didn’t.

Well, that was fucking it then. And fun it had been while it had lasted too: attaching myself to a man who had been expected to become Mayor of the North East, only to be derailed by a democratic rebellion and find myself a spare piece of furniture as they wheeled Julian off to the Home for Politicians Who Hadn’t Seen Things Coming. Was I going to be able to stay here? And if I couldn’t, what about Sonia? Would it be possible to keep a relationship going when you added a four-hour train journey? Was I about to lose her too?

My life seemed to be crashing down around my ears. And everything had seemed to be going so well.

It probably hadn’t, I realised. I’d likely just been quite good at ignoring that.

I walked back into my room and climbed into bed. I thought I’d made it back without disturbing Sonia, but when I climbed into bed she turned over and, without opening her eyes, murmured: ‘What was all that about?’

‘Julian’s getting the push,’ I said, dully. ‘He agreed to go.’ I felt as though I’d taken a punch right to the gut. Part of me wanted her to drop the subject immediately; another wanted us to talk about nothing else until one of us convinced me that everything was going to be alright.

It seemed to me as though Sonia delayed her reaction a little, like she wanted to deliver it only once it had been thought through. I saw her breathe in in the same second her eyes opened and recognised all the signs of her wanting to immediately pitch into a topic. Then her expression changed, becoming almost unreadable, before she finally said, ‘I see.’ She hesitated, and then said, ‘I’m sorry.’

The words ‘Are you?’ were already heading towards my lips almost before I was able to grab hold of them, stopping them from flinging themselves out there. They would have been stupid words, spat out in the heat of the moment.

She sat up a little in bed, looking at me closely. ‘What’ll happen to you?’ she asked, more awake. ‘Will you...will you stay here?’

‘For now,’ I said, even though that hadn’t been discussed. The second my parents stopped paying the rent, I had no place to live. It didn’t seem likely that they would keep funnelling money to me just to keep love alive. ‘Uncle Andrew was pretty brief.’

Sonia lay back down, staring up at the ceiling. After a while, she asked, ‘Do you blame me?’

‘No,’ I said, not having to think about it. I meant it too, I realised. ‘No, you said what you thought. And...you were right. It was never going to work out. I had to be a total idiot to think it was going to.’

I didn’t say what else I was thinking: what I’d realised as Sonia and I had walked off together.

It had been her.

There were other ways that it could have happened, and maybe I was wrong, but something about it made a terrible sort of sense. I remembered her calm thoughtfulness when I’d told her about Julian cutting jobs at the council; I remembered her speaking quietly to Uncle Andrew at the family meal, and her attending Ken Johnson’s surgeries for her old neighbour. I’d even told her about Ken and Julian’s argument, hours after it had happened.

Sonia hadn’t overreacted when I mentioned the threat to her position, because she’d known that she had a way to neutralise it and Julian. Ken Johnson sticking his oar in had told her exactly who to leak the information to. Ken had done the rest, representing a member of his constituency just like an MP ought to, saving jobs in the process.

I couldn’t prove any of it, and I was glad. Maybe if I had confirmation of that I’d feel less kindly towards Sonia: I didn’t know. In her shoes, I might have done the same thing.

A small part of me was impressed.

I forced myself to move past it. I had no proof, and what would I do with it if I did: confront her? Tell on her to Uncle Andrew? Julian was gone, and it didn’t sound like he’d be coming back. I’d left with Sonia the previous night and didn’t plan on walking out on her too.

Besides, if I'd worked it out, then Uncle Andrew knew already.

'I don't think anyone could have seen this coming, Tom,' Sonia was saying. 'This whole year...well, fuck this year. It's been one shitstorm after another.'

I nodded.

'If you do have to go back,' Sonia began, in a controlled voice, 'do you think we could still...'

'Lots of people do the long-distance thing now,' I said, trying to think of anyone I knew who did. I seemed to have fallen out of touch with all my friends.

'Lots can't handle it.'

'I reckon we could give it a fair try,' I said, more confidently than I felt right then. 'We're a couple of very practical people.'

She smiled a little. 'Two practical people separated by bloody stupid politics.'

'In fair Gateshead, where we lay our scene,' I supplied.

Sonia laughed, laying her head on my shoulder. 'Ever the arts student,' she said. 'Christ, you're going to have to get an actual *job*.'

'Fuck that,' I said. 'I'll just live off the family money. Become one of the idle rich.'

'The hell you will,' she replied. 'I disappointed countless generations of ancestors and brought shame upon my family for you. I'm not telling them you're unemployed as well.' She snuggled closer. 'Become a politician or something. At least it'll be an interesting life.'

I didn't reply; I just held her close. There was still too much rushing through my head. It had taken most of my concentration to even reply to what Sonia had been saying; I'd been wrapped up in my own thoughts, which were getting more and more tangled.

After a few minutes of silence, Sonia suddenly said, 'I want to see him.'

I stirred, surprised both by her saying something and what she'd said, and she added, 'Not right now, I mean. But before...I don't know, before he goes or whatever.' She looked at me, as though checking to see what I thought of the idea. 'I mean...it seems like the right thing to do. It'd feel weird not doing it.'

There was, I supposed, something unsatisfying about the current ending of my time spent with Julian. Along with Sonia, he'd been the person I'd seen the most of for almost the whole year. The idea of him dropping out of my life without so much as a goodbye didn't sit well, and as most of my future seemed not to give too much of a damn what I wanted, it would be nice to have some control over a certain part of it.

Uncle Andrew's warning about not seeing Julian reared its head in my mind, and I pushed it away. What I needed, more than anything, was a real ending. I needed to see this thing through, no matter how it was going to end.

I found myself nodding slowly. I wasn't sure quite when I'd started. 'You're right,' I said, simply. 'I think I need to see him too.'

'Of course you do,' Sonia said, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. She sighed. 'We had to meet this year, didn't we? What were you doing in 2012?'

'Shots mostly,' I said. 'I was in university.'

'Ah. The carefree, alcoholic and pre-Sonia life of Tom Barrett. How interesting.'

I laughed. 'Hardly. Went out, got drunk, occasionally threw up and managed to attend some lectures. It wouldn't make for a great book. What were you doing?'

'In 2012?' Sonia thought for a second. 'Probably work. I cared about my future career, not having money to burn like some people I could mention.'

'And practicing not bringing shame upon your family.'

'Oh, religiously.'

'And now here we are.'

'And now here we are,' Sonia agreed. She shifted against me, glanced at what could be seen of the sky between my blinds, and sighed. 'What time is it?'

\* \* \*

Actually seeing Julian took several weeks. This was partially due to the difficulty of getting hold of him; whatever number I tried to get him on just rang out and out. After the first few times, I worried that he'd done something drastic, but a quick and faux-casual call to Uncle Andrew reassured me that he was alive and well.

Another part of it was the awkwardness which was between us now. Our last meeting had been, to put it mildly, dramatic. Who knew what injured feelings he was still nursing, and what outward form they might end up taking? Even without Sonia's lambasting of him, he'd still been faced with me all but abandoning him right afterwards. Would he even want to meet?

There had been other things going on during that time. Once again, I'd found myself skimming through job advertisements and employment websites, applying for any graduate schemes and other positions that it seemed I had the slightest chance of getting. All of these were based in the North, with a surprising number in Newcastle itself. I didn't make much of a distinction between the areas of work if I was qualified

to do them, not because I didn't care, but because I still had no idea what I wanted to do. All I knew was that I wanted to do something, and that I wanted to do it here.

Sonia was a constant source of support and encouragement, insisting on proofreading applications and coming with up with an almost endless supply of possibilities which had slipped through my nets. I don't think either of us were entirely sure that it was going to work, but we were determined to make a hell of a try at it. It was time, I felt, to stop being an outsider: a passenger being carried by other people. I wanted to be a part of things, and to struggle, succeed or fail on a personal level.

My parents were both looming in the background, a constant reminder that it was possible for everything I had in Newcastle to be dragged away. They'd been resistant to me staying, and for a while Mum was even threatening to come here and drive me back. But, finally, they'd agreed that I could remain for a short while as I tried to find a job: a kind of parole, as Sonia termed it. I couldn't tell whether they were certain that I wouldn't manage it or very keen for me to make it. Either way, I supposed, they'd win.

In the face of all of this, I might even have given up trying to contact Julian if it hadn't been for Sonia. It was she who pushed for every phone call and email that we sent, although she was reluctant to make any of these herself. She thought that it was truly important, and so was not going to let the matter rest until either she or Julian was beyond any form of communication.

Finally, after almost a month of attempting to get in touch with my one-time mentor, I received a text from him. It was short, but not too curt in its tone, and it invited both Sonia and me to meet him for coffee.

When I told Sonia, she seemed a strange mix of relieved and wary. I couldn't blame her; I felt pretty hesitant about the meeting myself. Still, we'd promised ourselves that we would do this, and talking to him wouldn't have been nearly so hard as contacting him again to turn down an offer I'd already accepted.

So, on a crisp Tuesday morning, we took the bus from outside my apartment and made our way into town. Neither of us said anything as we rode towards the city, or when we passed over the large green Tyne Bridge. In the silence, I remembered the first time I'd taken this journey, gazing at the jumble of buildings and eras in bemusement. Now it was an all-too-familiar sight, the strangeness of it almost lost on me.



We were early for the meeting, but when we walked into Costa we saw that Julian was already there. I'm not sure what I had been imagining or expecting him to look like, but he looked better than that, and yet somehow worse at the same time. His smile was more natural than I'd assumed; his hair was tidy, and his typical sharp suit fitted him as well as ever. It could almost have been any other day.

But he looked tired. More than that: he looked, finally, beaten. It was the look of a man who had been racing against someone, and who had finally gotten sick of chasing a retreating back, deciding to stop on his own terms. Someone who had been swimming just ahead of sharks, right at the moment they realised that they were never going to make it to shore.

For the first time since I'd known him, Julian looked like someone who was resigned to let life happen to him.

He greeted both me and Sonia in a friendly, even warm fashion, insisting on buying Sonia's green tea and my double espresso. He didn't make conversation, but instead concentrated on our barista until he took hold of the tray and ferried it up the stairs and towards a pair of sofas.

Only when we were sat down, Julian opposite us, did he make a start.

'I'm sorry I didn't get back to you sooner,' he said. 'The past few weeks have been...*very* trying.'

We both nodded. After what Sonia had flung at him, he was entitled to do a little talking himself.

'You know,' he said, 'it took me far too long to work out that I wasn't happy. As long as I had something to do or work towards, then I could focus on that and forget about everything else. And when I had to stop...it didn't feel like there was much keeping me in the job.' He shook his head. 'I need a break. I didn't realise that until I talked to Andrew.'

Julian broke off, taking a drink from his espresso before continuing. 'I've always wanted to change things for the better. Stand up for the little man, stick it to those rich bastards who don't think about anything or anyone if it doesn't affect them. You know, it seemed very simple. And even when it wasn't, even when you had to come up with a lot of complicated ideas and plans, and research and go to meeting, it still *felt* simple. Because I was good at it. I *am* good at it. And I thought that if that was what politics was, then I was a lot better at it than anyone else.'

Neither Sonia nor I had touched our drinks. I'd had no idea what was going to be said between the three of us, but I'd never seen something like this coming: not a bit of it.

'But that's not it. Do you remember what I told you, Tom? When we met the first time?'

I tried a smile, hoping that I could once again pull him out of whatever hole he'd decided to plant himself in. 'You told me you always need sunglasses more often than you don't.'

To my immense relief, Julian laughed. 'And I stick to that advice,' he said. 'But what I meant was that politics was a matter of making people think that what you say is true and making them not trust anyone who tries to tell them otherwise. And I got told that when I started, and I laughed about it just as much as you did. But it's true. How many people voted to leave who are going to get money taken off them? Pensioners are going to lose over a hundred pounds per year, and that'll probably kill some of them. But they voted for it, because they were voting for getting the immigrants out, taking back control and a big pot of money that never even existed. There are people across the Atlantic who voted for Donald Trump, and he didn't even have the decency to try and con them; he threw lies at them that an idiot could prove were wrong, and they all wanted him in office because he tells it like it is.' He drained the rest of his espresso in a sharp movement. Beside me, Sonia flinched.

Julian put down his cup gently, and then shrugged. 'Do you know how *hard* it is to try and stand up for people and have them call you a liar and vote for the guy who's going to try and take every bit of their money he can? Because that's what it's like, being on the left. You're trying to get people a fair deal and make sure that people aren't going to get kicked to death because they were born in the wrong body or they're the member of the wrong religion, and people think you're fucking whiners.' He shook his head again. 'I could even work with that; it was something you could try to fight against. But...it's like there's something missing from it now. There's nothing for me in it: nothing fun.' Julian looked at me. 'Your uncle was right about that. He's right about most things, most of the time.' He shook his head. 'Don't tell him I said that, by the way.'

'Wouldn't think of it.'

'You know what I really wanted?' Julian asked, suddenly. Neither of us replied, and he went right on. 'I wanted people to trust me. I wanted people to know that I was

going to help them, and for them to support me or just let me get on with doing the job. But, doing this job, nobody gives a shit. You're not even able to change their minds, because you're not a politician; you're a manager. You're some guy draining money out of places that can't do without it, because someone else has told you to. You're making everyone worse off. And they're never going to like you, because there's fuck-all you can do to win them back. And whatever's going on in politics now...' Julian shrugged. 'I don't know.' He looked at me again. 'That was what was so great about having you around, you know? You were interested in what was going on; I could tell you my plans and you actually thought it through and even seemed excited about it.'

He smiled, and then looked at Sonia. 'I'm sorry about everything: the budget and...everything. Everyone else I knew was too busy for me. I had Tom, and I was scared that he was going to stop paying attention too.' Julian smiled again, slightly. 'Although you were a were a little harsh about it.'

Sonia nodded. 'I'd not had the best day. Like you, I guess. I shouldn't have...well, I'm sorry too. I didn't have to unload on you like I did.'

Julian waved the apology away. 'If you hadn't, I'd probably not have listened to Andrew. Like I said: you were right.'

'If harsh,' Sonia said.

He grinned. 'Maybe just a little.' Julian looked at the pair of us for a second. 'You're a good couple and you make each other happy, but I wasn't thinking about any of that. I was just thinking about me. Which was exactly what I'd promised myself I wouldn't do.'

'What will you do now?' Sonia asked.

Julian gave another shrug. 'I don't know. I've found out a lot about myself, and I'm going to have to deal with that before I choose anything. I think I'll take a trip first of all. Find somewhere they don't need politicians and stay there for a while: see if I'm good at anything else.' He sighed, but it wasn't as resigned as it might have been. 'There has to be something. I definitely wasn't a born politician.' He turned his gaze towards me again. 'What about you?' he asked. 'I know I've put you in a bad spot, and I'm really sorry about that —'

I waved the apology away before he could finish it. 'Don't worry about it. And I don't know.' I shifted on the sofa. 'I sort of feel like politics might not be my thing either.'

‘Well,’ Julian said, ‘no shame in that.’ He went quiet for a moment before saying, ‘Did you ever think you might want to go back to journalism? After what’s been going on over the last few months, I reckon they’ll want some people with ethics to get involved.’

I shrugged. ‘Doesn’t seem like the news has been much better than the politicians. It’s all tied up in the same mess.’

Julian nodded. ‘Maybe not, of course, but you have to think positive. And I know your uncle could set you up with some people. Hell, *I* could set you up with some people.’ He glanced at Sonia. ‘Maybe even here, if that was something you were looking for.’

I stared at Julian, who looked back at me with that faint smile of his. ‘If it’s any help,’ he said, ‘I’ve given you a quick course in what’s *not* good behaviour in politicians. Though I’d like to think that I might have taught you a little more than that.’

Feeling lost, I managed a nod. ‘I’ll...I’ll think about it.’

‘Well, think about it fast,’ he said. ‘Or you’ll have your mother down here before you know it.’

That, at least, made me laugh. ‘She’d not be seen dead in Newcastle.’

‘No,’ Julian said. ‘Maybe not.’

We didn’t talk much for the rest of the meeting. Julian had been most anxious about making peace with us, and now seemed content to sit and enjoy our quiet company, punctuated by the occasional observation and joke. Outside, you could hear the sound of Christmas carols played hesitantly on the bagpipes.

Julian seemed more peaceful than any other time I’d known him in. Part of me couldn’t help but see it as the fight having gone out of him, and I knew that that was right. I didn’t know how long the peace would remain and whether bitterness would rush back into its place; there seemed to be a good chance of it. But I knew, somehow, that this would likely be the last time that I would see him. I couldn’t have said why. I might have been wrong, but I didn’t think so. Something about this felt like the end.

I was aware of Sonia sitting next to me. Occasionally, she would still make some possessive display, like putting her hand on my knee, or running her fingers over mine. I couldn’t have said which were genuine affection and which were a gentle reminder for Julian, even after what everything that had been said. If Julian noticed, he didn’t

comment, or even seem to mind. The question of who'd told Ken Johnson about the punch wasn't raised, for which I was very grateful.

It might be possible, I thought, in one of those quiet stretches, to have another look back at journalism. There'd certainly been a lot of lies thrown about this year, and it seemed only fair to assume that we were in for even more, some of them by the press themselves. I suppose the truth could always need another man in its corner, even if they were a little jaded and out of practice. If I had Sonia there to keep me right, I might even manage.

For now, though, I let the comfortable quiet of the three of us fold over me, enjoying one of the few calm moments of the past several months. No news, no politics and no depression. At one point I'd regarded that as normal, somehow.

A short while later, Julian rose to his feet. It was, we understood, goodbye. He shook Sonia's hand, the pair of them wrapped in a kind of mutually embarrassed silence. Then he turned to me. His smile was a thousand miles away from the one he'd worn when the two of us had met, months ago, in a restaurant in London. Now here we were, in a café in Newcastle and everything had changed.

Julian extended his hand to me, wordlessly. I took it and looked into his face as we shook. 'I'll see you around, Tom,' he said. I wondered if he believed it; I didn't.

'It's been good working with you, Julian.' I tried not to think about the circumstances and the chaos we'd been through as I said it. I was remembering the laughter, the sense of purpose, and the optimism with which we'd started out in Newcastle as I shook his hand, and those times had indeed been good.

In the next second he'd released my hand, giving the pair of us one final smile. Sonia reached for the hand as I returned it to my side, taking it in her own, and I let her do it. We watched as Julian turned away from us, moving down the stairs and, from there, out of the door. He didn't look back as he left, and I found that I was relieved that he didn't.

We moved back to our sofa by the window, sitting down. From there, I could see Julian, walking out down the street that, until a short while ago, he'd been responsible for. Nobody looked at him; nobody recognised him. I watched him cross the street, then a bus passed behind him, and he was gone.

## EPILOGUE

‘We’re going to be late,’ I said, checking the time on my phone.

‘Keep your knickers on,’ Sonia said as she ran a brush through her hair. ‘There’ll have been people there since three; are you still holding out hopes of being in the front row?’

‘I’d settle for actually seeing him, you know.’ I yawned. It had been a long day of knocking on doors and extolling the virtues of the Labour Party. Gateshead was a safe red seat, with the Labour incumbent holding a majority of over ten thousand in the last couple of elections, but if 2016 had taught me anything, it was that complacency wasn’t a winning quality when it came to politics. There weren’t any guarantees any more

I looked at Sonia as she examined herself in the mirror, twisting a strand of hair around one finger. ‘Why are you dressing up so much? It’s a political rally, not dinner.’

Sonia checked her reflection one last time and turned to me. She looked like dynamite, but then she could probably make a prison jumpsuit look fashionable. ‘I just like to look nice is all. You might have noticed that after a year.’

‘Not quite a year,’ I said, standing up. ‘I believe the anniversary isn’t until the twenty-third.’

She reached up, putting her arms around my neck. ‘Twenty-fourth, actually. Unless you’re remembering a very different interpretation of our pre-Brexit interaction.’

‘I hadn’t gone to sleep, which means it was still the twenty-third for me.’

‘And I had,’ Sonia replied with a smile, ‘which makes it the twenty-fourth. And I think you’ll find that both clocks and calendars would agree with me.’

Our faces were very close, and we kissed briefly. ‘We could find some way to compromise,’ I said, once we’d broken apart.

Sonia’s smile, as it always seemed to, turned to grin. ‘Not very political of you, Tom. And us on our way to a rally too. All the canvassing wearing you down?’ I moved in to kiss her again, but she slid out of my arms, still grinning. ‘Nope,’ she said. ‘Come on: we have to get to the venue so you can throw your underwear at the Leader of the Labour Party.’

We left the house, alternating between bickering and laughing as we took the bus to the edge of the river. From there we walked to the Sage: a giant, misshapen

construction of glass and metal. Corbyn was giving the speech inside the building; the rally would be directly afterwards, in a public area outside.

Our journey got a lot slower as we reached the staircase up to the site. Part of this was due to the bag checks being carried out: a grim reminder of the recent terrorist attack in Manchester. The other, far more positive reason was the sheer amount of people who were apparently going in the same direction as the two of us. The queue stretched all the way down the metal steps and formed a comically-neat line almost reaching the museum nearby.

Sonia and I exchanged a look. 'I may have taken too long to get ready,' she said.

'You might have,' I said.

'I wasn't the one who was standing on doorsteps, reading the Communist Manifesto to pensioners,' she said, a little defensively. 'We could have been here hours ago if you'd been happy to just be a spectator.'

'I think those days are over,' I said. 'I'm a leftist firebrand now, menacing the elderly with radical ideas, stirring up discontent.'

'By which I assume you mean you're politely inquiring if they plan on voting for Labour and offering them information on issues and policies.'

'It sounds a little less exciting when you put it like that.'

She laughed, giving my hand a squeeze. 'Fair enough. You're my radical political foot soldier, fighting on the front lines of this election. Now, come on. We'll not see anything if we don't hurry up.'

We moved forward quickly, getting in the queue before anyone else beat us to it.

Getting up there didn't take all that long, and the drizzle wasn't too bad either. There was a sense of community in the queue which went beyond the mutual love every British resident has of a queue well done. I guess the idea that we were all there with the same intention had something to do with it, particularly as that intention was changing the government of our country.

As we moved into the venue, Sonia paused to look back. 'Jesus,' she said. 'The line's even longer than when we were in it.' I checked and saw that she was right. The venue itself was already packed. Everyone was standing shoulder to shoulder, laughing, singing, smoking and vocally wishing that the rain would 'just fuck off'.

'Come on,' Sonia said, taking hold of my hand and starting to drag me through the thick of the crowd. There didn't seem to be an ideal place to stand, and places to stand

at all were getting pretty unavailable by that point, so we did our best to move towards the staging as far as we could before the press of the bodies got too dense.

Once we were there, I took the opportunity to gaze around us. I couldn't put a number to the amount of people already there, but the eventual total would have to be in the thousands. We had an hour until kick-off after all.

Songs were being piped out through speakers and signs and placards were being waved in defiance of the gloomy weather. Beside us, a girl raised her shirt and flashed her chest to anyone within range; Sonia immediately turned to me in apparent expectation, but I was already looking at her. Our eyes met, and the two of us cracked up laughing. The girl wasn't noticeably offended.

The hour didn't take long to pass, and we kept ourselves amused by joining in with the singing whenever there was a song we recognised. Finally, a murmur rippled over the crowd, suddenly everyone was cheering. I glanced around in confusion before I noticed Sonia's finger pointed at the Sage's windows.

*There*, I saw her mouth shape; it was impossible to hear her over the yelling and applause. I turned to follow where she was indicating, and I saw him.

Again, I was struck by how ordinary he looked. In terms of his ability to fade into the background, he could have given Uncle Andrew a run for his money. And yet, because of Jeremy Corbyn, at least a few thousand people had gathered in this spot, in the rain, on a Monday night.

Which was fairly extraordinary.

He turned, only appearing to notice the crowd below him when he saw them. When he raised his hand in a wave, the cheers rose with it and the place seemed to shake with them. He turned back to talk to someone beside him, and then stepped out of sight.

I looked at Sonia, who had been shouting and applauding with the rest of them. She caught my eye and flashed me a smile. The cheers faded into a buzz of excited conversation, with people checking their phones and watches to see how close we were to the start.

It turned out we were still almost ten minutes away. Various other people showed up in the window, some of whom waved and were greeted with indiscriminate approval from the crowd below. I had no idea who any of them were, but the people around us seemed happy enough to cheer most anyone.



I supposed it was understandable. Since Julian's departure from both my life and local government, politics had been dynamic. Ever since May had announced that there was to be a general election, tensions had risen. At first, it had seemed like nothing more than salt in the wound: a final victory to complete the trifecta of losses that those of my political slant had suffered through. Brexit, Trump and May. When I'd heard the news, I'd not had much to offer besides a heartfelt sigh.

But things had changed. From a place in the polls some twenty points behind Theresa May and her Government something had clearly clicked into place for Corbyn, whether internally or on the part of the people around him. He had hit the ground running and had built momentum with each rapid step. In the space of seven weeks, he had closed the gap far more than I or even Sonia had given him credit for.

Some of these gains, it had to be said, had been due to the Government. Quite apart from their track record before the election was announced, the mistakes which had been made on the road to polling day had been a hair away from inexcusable. Fox hunting, the diminishing of pensions, May's plans to do away with encryption and to regulate the internet, the lack of costing in the manifesto and the manner in which our Prime Minister had shielded herself from the public eye in the past several weeks: all of it had fed into the hands of her competition, and I couldn't tell you how she'd thought that any of it would benefit her.

And now we were here. In the rain on a Monday night.

Because, despite how outlandish it might have seemed seven weeks ago, we had hope.

Except in the most miraculous of circumstances, I refused to believe that Labour would win. There was always that 'except' now: the legacy of the United States' own political events. You never said 'never' because, by this point, you should know better. But even Sonia thought that a Labour government wasn't likely, and I was better at being cynical than her.

Still, we were here. This wasn't a win-or-lose game; there were ways to come in second place which would deliver plenty of satisfaction. May failing to make any meaningful increase, to me, would be very pleasant. Losing seats, whilst less probable, would be even better. Sonia had even speculated aloud one night that the Conservatives might lose their majority. I had smiled and nodded noncommittally, but privately thought that it was a bridge too far.

Whenever I read the news, and I did so several times a day, I imagined Julian's reaction to everything that had happened. Sometimes I tried to guess what he'd try to teach me from it, or what future he would predict from it: the political fortune-teller hard at work. I had no idea how close I was getting to his true thoughts, but it had become a habit I was unlikely to kick, and it was easier than predicting Uncle Andrew's responses.

I hadn't seen Julian since he'd walked out of the café, back on the first of December. That had been seven months ago. Uncle Andrew had been reticent on any details the last time I'd seen him, just going so far to assure me that all was well, and that Julian was, probably, happier now. I suspected that there were some things that were being kept from me, but I didn't let it bother me like it would have done a year ago. I'd gotten used to being an outsider; that was a lesson Julian had taught by bad example. I had no desire to ever look as tired or as beaten as he had during his last few weeks in the job.

The crowd suddenly stirred, a mass of people moving as one, and then let out cheers, shouts and applause. Beside me, Sonia craned her neck futilely, trying to look over the head of the six-footer in front of her.

'Want to get on my back?!' I shouted to her over the noise. She looked up at me, eyebrow arched, and mouthed two words which I didn't need to hear to understand. Smiling, I turned back to the podium, and then laughed as I saw who was standing in front of the microphone. I considered telling Sonia, but I didn't get the chance.

'*Ladies and gentlemen,*' the heavily Northern voice boomed over the speakers. I saw Sonia's eyes widen and then she was laughing too, shaking her head slowly. There was only one person I knew in politics who was so completely, authentically Geordie. Ken Johnson had crossed the river and was playing in front of a big crowd.

I listened as Ken told us all what a pleasure it was to stand in front of us and to see such support for a party who was there for the many, not for the few. To my surprise he was a good and, more importantly, an enthusiastic speaker. The way he talked left you in no doubt that these were his words, and that he believed all of them. I remembered the lack of a regard that Julian had almost painstakingly cultivated for him and wondered if he'd ever seen the man give a speech.

I wondered, in a world where things had gone very differently, how Julian might sound making this same address.

Probably like he wasn't from around here.

Sonia tugged at my arm, and I looked down into her face. ‘He’s not bad,’ she said, able to talk normally without the cheers and still grinning broadly. ‘Almost makes me want to vote for him.’

‘You’re not voting Labour?’ I asked. ‘You’d better keep that quiet around here.’

‘I’m voting Labour,’ she said, rolling her eyes. ‘I just wasn’t doing it because of him.’

She had a point, I guessed. Under other circumstances I wouldn’t have known who my MP was, and I hadn’t done too much research beyond which party he belonged to. It wasn’t going to be that kind of election.

Ken Johnson spoke on, continuing to impress me in spite of some residual resistance towards him. That was probably a piece of Julian, or some still-present loyalty to him. Perhaps it was immature; this wasn’t the time or place to wonder about that. But the MP for Newcastle East left to a good round of applause, leaving the way clear for another MP: the man who represented me, or was supposed to. We’d not had much effect on each other.

He didn’t have much effect on the crowd either. Certainly, they were listening attentively and even applauding at some intervals, but it wasn’t enthused; it was polite. No matter how competent the Gateshead MP was at his job, the assembled masses weren’t here for him and he didn’t have the unexpected electricity of Ken Johnson. It didn’t make any difference that we were, in political terms, on his patch. There was a very short list of people we’d be standing here in the drizzle for, and he wasn’t on it.

Sonia obviously felt the same way, though she was at least listening to what he had to say. ‘Did he just call us “comrades”?’ she asked, someway between amusement and surprise. ‘Always thought that was just a joke.’

‘We’ve got a real leftist opposition now,’ I said. ‘It’ll be agitprop and the Cheka next.’

‘Now there’s a vote-winner,’ she said, turning back to try and see through the forest of bodies.

We got through several more speakers, and I began to worry that the crowd’s restlessness might start to show itself. The last thing we needed was footage of people leaving early or for some idiots to start shouting down those speaking out of boredom. I needn’t have been anxious: we may have only come here for Corbyn, but apparently everyone agreed that he was worth waiting for.

The Police and Crime Commissioner for the North East, a job which I had no grasp of but just assumed was important, was winding down what might have been the duller speech of the lot when I turned my head in order to take in the general mood of the crowd. And that was when I saw him.

Well, it was when I saw *someone*. The back of his head was turned towards me and there was a fair distance between the two of us. Still, it was conceivable. The hair was, if not the same, then near enough that seven months was a reasonable excuse. Maybe he was a little slimmer, but the height was very similar, if not the sort of detail you remember accurately. And if I'd not seen that exact suit before, it was the style and cut that he'd been partial too.

I stared at him, if it was him, furiously willing him to turn around. There was no reason for him to do so; he was, after all, facing the speaker. But if he didn't turn around, I couldn't be sure, and if I wasn't sure then it would never stop bothering me.

The crowd shifted, and I noticed in a distracted sort of way that it had become excited again, moving about almost agitatedly. A tall, heavysset man moved between me and the figure I was staring at, blocking my view of, if I was right, Julian Ashworth.

Suddenly decisive, I started to plan how to get from here to there, even if we didn't talk but only confirmed that we were both in the same place and both unable to separate ourselves completely from the political spectacle. But Sonia had grabbed my hand in hers, staring and standing on her toes as the moving crowd allowed her a better view. For a mad moment I thought that she'd seen who I might have, and that the hand was a last remnant of possessiveness that Julian had brought out in her.

But she was staring instead at the podium and at the man walking over to it, and suddenly I realised what all of the cheers and wild applause had been about.

I caught a glimpse of the next and final speaker as he positioned himself in front of the microphone. Again, I found myself thinking how plain he looked: how you'd look past him in the street if his photograph hadn't been printed beside the newspapers' daily helping of scorn and condescension. He looked, if you had to pick a word, unassuming. And if the last several weeks had taught anyone anything that they'd been willing to learn, it was that assumptions were dangerous things to make.

For the second time in my life, I saw Jeremy Corbyn in the flesh. I clapped and even cheered (though not without feeling a little awkward about it). Beside me, Sonia was confidently doing the same, smiling past the rain that was still hitting her face.

I glanced over to where I had seen, or thought I'd seen Julian, wondering what he was doing. I couldn't spot him; the crowd had become too lively and it was impossible to see almost anything.

I turned back to look at where I knew Corbyn must be standing, hands starting to sting slightly from all the applause, and listened.

*'Thank you, Gateshead! Thank you, the North East! Thank you, those who have come across the river from Newcastle! The Bridge unites us; the politics unites us; the future gives us hope in unity...'*

Corbyn continued to address the crowds gathered before and around him as the light rain fell on everyone, and the skies rumbled with distant, approaching thunder.

**DOES THE REPRESENTATION OF  
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PROSE FICTION?**

Volume 2 of 2

D H Spain

PhD

2018

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DAVID HARRISSON SPAIN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements of the University of  
Northumbria at Newcastle for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy

Research undertaken in the Faculty of  
Arts, Design & Social Sciences

## **CONTENTS**

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
<b>CHAPTER ONE</b> .....	4
<b>CHAPTER TWO</b> .....	20
<b>CHAPTER THREE</b> .....	37
<b>CHAPTER FOUR</b> .....	55
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	74
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	77



## INTRODUCTION

If one is to discuss the challenges facing the political novelist, then what must first be accomplished is to define what is meant when one refers to a ‘political novel’. There have been many definitions, and it is almost certain that more will be offered as the genre evolves and responds to the shifting political attitudes and ideologies that are its most vital component. The following chapter will address and explore these definitions in order to inform and provide context for my own characterisation of the genre.

When I refer to political fiction, it is my intention that the term should encompass any work written with the aim of exploring political processes, the exercise of political power or the effects of such political action upon the body politic, *or* a work which can be said to carry out this function regardless of the author’s intentions. This is a broad definition, but it is my intention to include works which respond to political events or circumstances without concentrating upon traditional centres of political power such as Westminster or Whitehall; such novels can possess great political force.

What the best political novels achieve, and what I wished to accomplish with my own work, is the positioning of the political substance as a central and dynamic element within the fiction. If an author is to create a forceful and effective representation of politics, they cannot afford to neglect the interaction between the narrative and the political subject matter. The story and its characters must explore the politics contained within the novel; the fictional politics should perform such a vital role that the story could not be told without their inclusion. Professor Bernard Crick writes that novels that ‘simply use unreflectively a political background for a story-line’ can rarely hope to ‘mirror or influence to some extent the context of political beliefs, behaviour and morality’ (Crick 202). It is not a prerequisite that political fiction should accomplish this, yet those works which are able to match this with a depiction of politics vital enough to have some impact upon the political sphere are often the greatest additions to the canon. This was my aim for my political novel, and this intention shaped the work as much as real political events I used as the novel’s political landscape.

Achieving such a representation of politics is far from a simple task. In his own political novel, Stendhal asserts that ‘politics in a work of literature is like a pistol-shot in the middle of a concert, something loud and vulgar, and yet a thing to which it

is not possible to refuse one's attention' (qtd. in Howe 15). Stendhal's words draw attention to a fact that cannot easily be disputed: the inclusion of politics within a work of fiction is a difficult endeavour to bring off well. The political author is working with highly divisive subject matter, and it is likely that many will reject their work on an ideological basis. The scope of what a political author must try to capture, drawing upon true events and authentic attitudes to create the political element within their work, is daunting. Politics requires the participation and activity of hundreds and contains rules and subject matter of varying levels of complexity. Politics is an opaque and intricate institution, and the political novelist cannot presume experience or understanding on the part of their readers; they must ensure that what they depict is comprehensible without being oversimplified, clear without misrepresenting. It is little wonder that some of the most celebrated political novels, of which a survey is provided in Chapter One, have originated from politicians, whose familiarity with the practices and mechanics of Westminster and Whitehall grant them the ability to create a vibrant, detailed snapshot of political institutions within their works.

It is the goal of both this commentary and the accompanying novel to identify the key challenges facing a writer attempting to represent politics in prose fiction, to explore the methods I have employed to overcome them and to determine to what degree these measures have been successful.

Chapter One of this reflective commentary is comprised of a review of some of the major works of political fiction, as well as a survey of critical works dedicated to an analysis of the genre and its characteristics, including an examination of how the definitions of political fiction have evolved over the past century.

Chapter Two will reflect upon the portrayal of both the personal and political content of *A Northern Exit*.<sup>1</sup> These elements, both personal and political, form the two halves of the driving force of the novel, and the chapter is concerned with exploring their interactions and interdependence, which I believe to be the most dynamic component of political fiction. These include the manner in which the personal and political subject matter of the novel are brought into opposition in order to increase tension within the work, or else how either the personal or the political element can motivate activity in its counterpart.

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<sup>1</sup> David Spain, *A Northern Exit*. All page references are to the version which forms the first part of this doctoral thesis and will be given in the text from now on, identified as 'ANE'.

Chapter Three is concerned with the narrative voice of the political novel. It explores the reasons I chose to employ a first-person narrator and what benefits a subjective, emotional voice can offer political fiction: a genre that relies predominantly upon both omniscient and limited third-person narration. This is followed by a reflection upon the challenges my use of Tom as my narrator brought, which include the problem of Tom's limited knowledge and political insight, as well as the risk of inviting partisan opposition to his manner of portraying political issues. This chapter concludes by analysing the methods I employ to mitigate these complications whilst maintaining the use of Tom as my narrator.

Chapter Four focuses on the role of Newcastle upon Tyne within the novel. The city was not merely a setting for a political narrative as a means of avoiding the familiar parliamentary backdrops of other works; its architecture, its history and its political composition have great bearing on both the regional and national events contained within the novel. The chapter examines the importance of capturing the sense of place and atmosphere within political fiction and the methods and sources I have employed to create an authentic, vibrant milieu that does not simply house the political events but is an organic part of them.

## CHAPTER ONE

Over its relatively brief existence, political fiction has used a number of forms and has undergone various transformations. Consequently, perceptions of the genre have changed over this time, which can be seen clearly when one tries to provide a comprehensive definition of the political novel.

The first major review of political fiction (other than a brief chapter in A. W. Ward's *Cambridge History of English Literature*) was produced in 1924 by Morris Edmund Speare: *The Political Novel: Its Development in England and America*. The work was written following the First World War and the 1918 Representation of the People Act, both of which Speare credited with what he viewed as a revaluation of traditional views of public affairs and a renewed interest in politics, leading to a greater prominence for fiction relating to political affairs.

Speare's scope for what might be regarded as political fiction is dissimilar from more modern attitudes. His proposed definition for the political novel is laid out early in his study:

*It is a work of prose fiction which leans rather to "ideas" than "emotions"; which deals rather with the machinery of law-making or with a theory about public conduct than with the merits of any given piece of legislation; and where the main purpose of the writer is party propaganda, public reform, or exposition of the lives of the personages who maintain government, or of the forces which constitute government (Speare ix).*

Speare's definition is restrictive. His insistence that ideas rather than emotions are the greater element of the political novel contrasts with both political novels throughout the genre's existence and more recent critical thought; emotion along with other forms of personal feeling is something that I myself have relied upon whilst writing my novel. Perhaps it is this preference for ideas that results in him favouring Disraeli: a man with plenty of political ideas to whom he dedicates no less than five chapters of his study.

Above all, Speare regards the political novel as something that deals with the machinery of politics as well as the men and women 'sophisticated in their tastes, highly trained in the complex world of affairs and of diplomacy' who inhabit the political sphere (Speare 23). It is a view of politics that is far less familiar to the modern reader, whose elected representatives are unlikely to be 'by their very greatness, the more removed from the ordinary world of ordinary men and women' (Speare 24).

Speare's claim that the political novelist's main purpose is reform, propaganda or exposition also overlooks the sense that one might write a political novel with the aim of captivating or diverting a reader rather than from a desire to preach or propagandise. A political message is often an important component of a political novel, though it would be wise to bear in mind Stendahl's warning of pistol shots in orchestras when considering the purpose of the political novel, not allowing propaganda to eclipse the art.

Thirty years later, Joseph Blotner's 1955 work, *The Political Novel*, offers a broader approach to what constitutes political fiction, defining a political novel to be a work in which characters 'carry out political acts or move in a political environment' (Blotner, *Political Novel* 1-2). This classification, which deals with politics at every level of society, is 'wide and inclusive, but so is political activity' (Blotner, *Political Novel* 2). For a later work, produced eleven years later, Blotner narrowed his definition of the political novel, excluding novels 'which do not deal primarily with political processes and actions' or 'portraying actions and attitudes which can be regarded as political only after being extracted from a matrix of allegory and symbol' (*Modern American Political Novel* 4). Though still more lenient than Speare, Blotner had his expectations of the political novel and imposed them upon his studies: for a novel to be political, then its focus must be political action.

For Blotner, the political novel's message and moral can be reinforced or more entertainingly packaged with the use of 'laughter, suspense, or a cops-and-robbers chase that will make it memorable', something which would have been made clearer with the rise of political thrillers accompanying the Cold War (Blotner, *Political Novel* 7). Far more than Speare, Blotner is accepting of the need for distraction for the reader and willing to permit this intrusion of action or drama into the halls of government, though he does not explore the political relevance that might exist within the laughter, suspense or the chase, framing these elements as pure entertainment rather than a politically charged addition.

Irving Howe's *Politics and the Novel* (1957) proposed a broader definition for the political novel: 'a novel in which *we take to be dominant* political ideas or the political milieu, a novel which permits this assumption without thereby suffering any radical distortion and, it follows, with the possibility of some analytical profit' (Howe 17, emphasis his). This definition is less restrictive than those offered by Speare or Blotner, though in his introduction Howe stresses a separation between the social and

political novels, claiming that the social novels could not portray a society ‘too restive under the knife’ (Howe 19). Howe acknowledges that there are works that fit into both the social and political novel categories and few examples of ‘pure’ types, though he maintains the distinction between the two and offers little consideration in his work to those novels that portrayed a ‘steady’ society: works such as *Coningsby* or *Beauchamp’s Career* (Howe 19).

Howe’s work is concerned with the treatment of politics in fiction rather than working within or exploring the characteristics of the genre of the political novel, addressing what Howe views as the major challenge facing the political fiction writer: ‘to make ideas or ideologies come to life’ (Howe 21). For Howe, the answer for this is the fusion of the emotions of characters within his novel with the ideas that the novel explores. Howe’s recommendation for the political novelist is to explore the space ‘between the ideology that has been preconceived and the tangle of feelings and relationships he is trying to present’, bringing the abstract, conceptual nature of political thought into contact with the heat of passions and emotions (Howe 22). It is from this interaction, Howe claims, that the political novel ‘gains its interest and takes on the aura of high drama’ (Howe 20). Though not exploring the political novel as a genre, Howe’s emphasis on the relationship between the personal and the political is an important component of the vast majority of the canon: a trend examined in the review of political fiction.

In his 1966 study, *The American Political Novel*, Gordon Milne states that the mark of a work of political fiction ‘would seem to be the presence of political ideas and of the political milieu’ (Milne 5). He allows that the genre may include novels depicting ‘a conflict between two ideologies such as Communism and democracy’, ‘the connection between the political figure and the body politic’ or ‘fiction with the political scene as background and books which offer accounts of politicians and political careers’ (Milne 5). He is not wary of including in his study novels that might be more readily classed as economic or utopian fiction: genres that have a close kinship with political fiction whilst not taking politics as their primary focus. Whilst this allows Milne to explore more instances of fictional depictions of political movement, in a study that covers the years 1774 to 1964 some stricter categorisation may have been beneficial. There is also the unanswered question of how prominent the politics forming the background to a novel must be before the work itself can be considered a political novel. Milne does not establish such criteria, creating a

definition for the genre that could see it encompass books with the most passing of references to the political scene; he is on firmer ground with political ideas and ideological conflict.

It is Michael Wilding who next seeks to expand the catalogue of books under scrutiny, and in his *Political Fictions* (1980) he attempts to garner appreciation for novels that do not fall within the scope of previously-catalogued corpuses of political novels. 'If by political fictions,' he writes in his introduction, 'we mean imaginative prose works that say something useful or interesting about politics, then we need to move beyond the narrow confines of realism' (Wilding, *Political fictions* 5). He does not offer an absolute definition of the political novel itself, but rather demonstrates the shortcomings of descriptions offered by the likes of Speare and Howe. Wilding claims that Speare maintains a narrow definition 'that corresponded with the narrow social elite that peopled the drawing-rooms of these novels' (Wilding, *Political fictions* 1). Whilst acknowledging Howe's more inclusive approach to the definition of the political novel, he states Howe and other analysts maintain too rigid a focus upon realism at the expense of other genres: the fable, the utopian fantasy and the dystopian novel.

Wilding claims that 'fiction dealing with politics successfully is responsive to the forces of society; these forces manifest themselves in the cultural area, have their aesthetic expression'. (*Political fictions* 5) He argues that the genres through which authors portray their political subject matter has as much ideological and political force as their narrative or characters: to confine the definition of the political novel to works of realism and documentary was to ignore alternative literary categories through which a political message or protest might be made. He also defends the place of emotion within the political work, opposing Speare's claim that ideas should take sole precedence, asserting, 'political commitments are not purely rational or intellectual; the irrational, instinctive, emotional, and sexual are important' (*Political fictions* 166). Rather than emotion being a secondary concern in the political novel, as Speare would have it, or brought into conjunction with abstract ideology in the manner Howe suggests, Wilding brings to fore the notion that emotions and other personal substance of the political novel are political in their own right. Lacking a definition of political fiction, however, Wilding risks the inclusion of a great many works with only a tangential relationship to the genre.

In *Atrocity and Amnesia: The Political Novel Since 1945* (1987), Robert Boyers focuses upon a tightly defined period, analysing works published between 1945 and 1980. Even with this relatively small sample size, Boyers admits that ‘one despairs of generating adequate classifications’ (*Atrocity* 4). He sympathises with Howe’s reluctance to create a rigid definition, though notes that since Howe’s work was published ‘the major political fictions of our day compel a very different perspective’ (*Atrocity* 6). Boyers makes his own additions to Howe’s classifications, stipulating that in such works as meet Howe’s definition, political intrigue must be ‘more than a backdrop for the dramas of sensibility their authors wish to unfold,’ and that the novels’ principal characters ‘regard their personal fates as intimately bound up with social and political arrangements that can be controlled only by those who are capable of intrigue and calculation.’ (Boyers, ‘V. S. Naipaul’ 366).

Boyers’ notion of politics being more than a backdrop for the novel’s action is a sensible addendum, yet the apparent awareness of the main characters of the presence of politics in their lives seems a severe criterion. Lack of political awareness on a character’s part can make a novel’s politics even sharper, a device I employ in *A Northern Exit*. This second amendment to Howe’s broad definition risks making Boyers’ proposed classification overly narrow.

A far more rigorous and detailed definition is offered in by Tom Kemme in his *Political Fiction, The Spirit of the Age, and Allen Drury* (1987). In this study of Drury’s novels, Tom Kemme conceives a definition of what he refers to as ‘pure’ political fiction, as opposed to ‘a novel about politics’, which he describes as:

a work of prose fiction which primarily focuses upon the exercise of political power within the body politic and where political ambition, political plans, and political acts permeate and unify the novel through both plot and character (Kemme 5).

By power, Kemme refers to ‘the ability to make things happen within the body politic’ (Kemme 5). Though this definition is more comprehensive, Kemme’s criteria mark a shift away from the presence of the political milieu as an identifying feature of the political novel. Kemme’s work focuses upon the novels of Allen Drury, all of which took place within an explicitly political setting, but his definition is a further broadening of the political novel’s scope and contrasts with Speare’s focus upon the ‘machinery of law-making’ or Howe’s ‘political milieu’.



In examining Drury's works, Kemme addresses what he terms 'the Spirit of the Age', by which he means 'the temper of the times' formed by the events and ideological struggles of the period (Kemme 2). The term 'Spirit of the Age' is not the most appropriate for the purposes of examining and depicting the political scene considering the implication that there is a single unified feeling that can be distilled from an exploration of a period; this is certainly the not case for the interval covered by *A Northern Exit*. Perhaps it is Drury's ability to respond to and capture the mood of the era that prompts Kemme to broaden proposed definitions to encompass the attitudes of a nation rather than solely those characters that are an active part of political processes. The distinction is especially appropriate today when one considers the growing access to political action and institutions afforded to those who are not a part of the political establishment; one need look no further than the EU referendum and the prevalence of the debate within the body politic.

In his 1991 work, *The Centre of Things*, Christopher Harvie does not put forward his own definition of the political novel, relying most heavily on a description of the genre from 1928 by H. A. L. Fisher: 'the novel which chiefly concerns itself with men and women engaged in contemporary political life and discussing contemporary political ideas' (Fisher 25). Harvie does elaborate, claiming that this referred to 'a realistic treatment of parties, Parliament, the work of government – and the relationship of this to less overtly political things like religious and economic conflicts, public opinion and the media, industry, war and foreign policy' (Harvie 2). Unlike Kemme, Harvie clearly views political fiction as remaining near the political institutions, though he is willing to admit 'the occasional abstract idea, conveyed by treatise or by non-naturalistic fiction – Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, for example' (Harvie 2).

Harvie's work does not provide one with an idea of the defining characteristics or functions of the political novel, as Speare and Blotner offered in their surveys, though there are brief explorations of the genre's form and content. Harvie does join Blotner in arguing the place of romantic content such as love stories within the political novel, claiming that 'all aspects of relationships between the sexes, from physical desire through idealistic inspiration to the ensnaring of heiresses and inheritances, play particular political rôles' (Harvie 5). He similarly recognises the use of action within the political novel for the same reason, offering the political thriller as an example of a subgenre that has included and made use of this element since its inception.

The most recent addition to this collection of critical material is Steven Fielding's 2014 survey of the depiction of British politics in fiction, *A State of Play*. In this work, Fielding sums up the dilemma facing political novelists appropriately: 'A writer without an audience is like a politician without votes: possibly interesting but definitely irrelevant' (Fielding 10). Though he acknowledges the existence and relevance of works that did not receive mass attention at the time of their publication, or those which deliberately sought minority audiences, he maintains that writers can only work with subjects 'that already have some meaning for audiences' (Fielding 11). Fielding's book explores the context in which political fictions are created and how the representation of politics in works of fiction has developed from the debut of the novel to the present age of politics-themed films and television series. Whilst it is clear that the year or decade in which each novel, film or television programme was produced had a marked effect on its form and content, what Fielding also wishes to make apparent is the symbiotic nature of this relationship and the power which a fictional treatment of politics had to shape and direct the conception of politics held by those who consumed them.

Fielding does not neglect the role of emotion in a work of political fiction, continuing the shift from Speare's insistence on the pre-eminence of ideas. He states his belief that 'Those who wrote about politics had to touch emotion as well as reason,' asserting that to accomplish the latter necessitated the achievement of the former (Fielding 31). Though it is a belief that I share and one of the main intentions of my political novel, Fielding does little to expand upon this point other than to comment upon the presence of melodrama and romance in Disraeli's novels.

This review of the critical analyses of the political novel demonstrates the broadening of the genre's definition over its existence. There has been a clear shift from Speare's classification of the political novel as a realist work focusing upon political institutions and the pre-eminence of ideas over emotions. Critics have expanded the boundaries of the genre to encompass works that explore political activity and ideas outside of recognised centres of politics, or even in fantastic settings, and their effect upon the body politic portrayed through various aesthetic modes. The role of affect and the personal within the political novel is another area that has been subject to noticeable change. Studies of the genre have increasingly argued that elements such as emotion are of central importance to the political novel, with Howe emphasising the conflict between ideology and emotion as key to the tensions within

a political work whilst Wilding argues that these instances of the personal are in themselves inherently political.

We are left, then, with the question of my own definition of the political novel. Following an examination of these classifications, I would define the political novel as a work that takes either political processes, the exercise of political power or the effect of political action upon the body politic as its key focus. As the existing critical study has overseen a broadening of the definition, and the increasing politicisation of different aspects of life, it seems appropriate that the definition used encompasses many forms of political action and movement. In *A Northern Exit*, parliamentary processes are not closely explored, and the novel's themes dictate that the exercise of political power can rarely be accomplished. Politics appears most noticeably in the novel in the form of an event by which the characters are affected by in both political and personal means.

Whilst establishing a definition of the political novel is useful in maintaining focus upon the genre and its innate challenges to the prose fiction writer, to gain a better sense of these challenges it is important to study the canon of political fiction itself and so gain an understanding of the purpose and character of the political novel. The following review of political fiction is by no means thorough, confining itself to the political works that informed the writing of *A Northern Exit*. Its purpose is to identify the common, unifying factors of the British political novel throughout its existence, as these works represent the same political system depicted by my own novel. Prominence especially is given to those novels wherein politics is active as a force within the fiction, as well as those works that represent their political mechanics and framework with detail that goes beyond the mere establishment of a setting. As a consequence, many of the novels covered within this literature review have been authored either by politicians or by others with experience in the political sphere, whose familiarity enables them to write with an authority and an understanding of political action. It is not my intent to establish that the only political novels worth studying are those written by politicians or political journalists, and there are novels such as Richard Kelly's *The Knives* (2016) that provide a meaningful and involved representation of politics, yet the result is that many of the works featured in the following review are the creations of such figures and that these entries are examined at greater length.

Although political thought and activity has been an important presence within fiction and novels for centuries, I have chosen to take John Galt's *The Member* (1832) as my starting point, as this work was the first English language novel to place Parliament, political processes and the political state of the nation at the core of its narrative. Galt's novel explores the routes one might take to becoming an MP, including election in a rotten borough and the practice of buying one's seat, informed by the author's 'fraternisation with members' (Galt ix). Jobbry, the eponymous Member, is able to demonstrate the fashion in which political power was exercised prior to the 1832 Reform Bill, finding sympathy for the Reformers and even existing briefly, like them, without his social and political privilege. It is a novel dedicated to an exploration of the political activity of its era and finds that there is much that must change.

But whilst Galt can, I believe, be credited with the political novel's debut, it was Disraeli who developed and brought prominence to the genre. Disraeli's Political Trilogy of *Coningsby* (1844), *Sybil* (1845), and *Tancred* (1847) were written with the intention to entertain, but there was a purpose beyond that: they are the means through which Disraeli 'set forth the principles which were to create a revitalized Tory party' (Blotner, *Political Novel* 19). His idealistic protagonists allowed Disraeli to show his reader, to his mind, the dissatisfactory state of the nation, prompted by such political events as the 1832 Reform Act. Disraeli's own experience as a politician could offer readers 'access to a lofty, desirable world, in a period in which journalists cast a respectful veil across "the inside life of politics"' (Fielding 30). The author's experience of the political sphere and his fictional imitations of identifiable public figures create the sense that what Disraeli offers is an accurate depiction of the political situation (Speare 19).

The works are often accused of sacrificing a story in order to present a manifesto for Young England (O'Kell 58). Disraeli himself stated in a preface to *Coningsby* that his resorting to fiction was due to his desire for a 'method which, in the temper of the times, offered the best chance of influencing opinion' (Blotner, *Political Novel* 19). Yet there is affect present in Disraeli's Political Trilogy, aided by the *bildungsroman* form which sees his protagonists mature inside a political framework. *Coningsby* is not only the story of a young man reaching political wisdom, but personal happiness as well (Weeks 396). There are passages in which the political substance is treated

with overwhelming emotion as ‘the issues of party ideology are absorbed in the destiny of the heroic role’ (O’Kell 75).

Disraeli is often contrasted with Anthony Trollope, who produced the Palliser Novels from 1864 to 1880. Trollope’s political experience – a failed by-election in Beverley – cannot hope to match Disraeli’s, and the lack of analysis of the social problems England faced is a criticism Trollope often receives (Nardin 679). Yet there are similarities between Disraeli and Trollope’s work, and these are displayed most obviously in the strengths shared by the writers. Like Disraeli, Trollope makes use of the form of the heroic young man making his way into politics, most notably with his character of Phineas Finn who appears in the three most political Palliser Novels: *Phineas Finn* (1869), *Phineas Redux* (1874), and *The Prime Minister* (1876). As with Disraeli, political and personal substance comes together within the novels. Phineas leaves politics when his personal convictions clash with party loyalty in *Phineas Finn*, and in both *Phineas Finn* and *Phineas Redux*, the love element is ‘intimate and private, but it is also insistently political in its implications’ as Finn’s ‘love life and political career are inextricably bound together’ (Polhemus 384). Whilst not putting forward his own political ideas as Disraeli had, Trollope offers a description of political life with a cast of recognisable public figures, set against a backdrop of the ‘basic issues and attitudes of this era’ in which politics and personal feeling conflict and drive the story (Blotner, *Political Novel* 31).

George Eliot’s 1866 work, *Felix Holt: The Radical*, takes as its main political focus the election at Loamshire, a part of the political process with which her readers could identify on account of the ability of some of them to participate and which had particular relevance as a result of the approach of the Second Reform Bill in 1867. The violence which breaks out at the election indicate that, despite the novel’s 1832 setting, the novel responds to the political events from its time of writing, including a possible reference to the execution of George Gordon in 1865 following the Morant Bay Rebellion (Harvie 81). In this novel too, there is interdependence between the public and private spheres, seen through the spiritual and moral growth of Esther, the novel’s heroine, and the political nature of her romance with the eponymous Radical (Bode 770).

Elections are also a focus of George Meredith’s *Beauchamp’s Career*, written in 1875. Meredith, in a similar manner to Disraeli and Trollope, wrote from a position of experience, as the novel was informed by his efforts in aiding with the failed electoral

campaign of his friend Admiral Maxse in 1868 (Harvie 106). The novel's political authority, Wilding claims, is primarily a result of 'documentary basis for the political portraits' and the presentation of political issues of the day, such as Game Laws and the dependence of the press upon their advertisers (Wilding, 'Beauchamp's Career' 47). Yet whilst the election and the first portion of the novel is the most explicitly political, the domestic portions of the novel have been praised for their 'more subtle transformation of politics into questions of human relationships and intersubjectivity that make the text an unusually powerful political narrative' (Handwerk 670). The novel's narrative, its structure of mounting disappointment and its mixing of romantic and realist modes all combine to present one of the work's major political point – the incompatibility of the Carlylean hero with Victorian establishment politics – with far more force than the sentiment being expressed by a character or a Disraeli-type author-narrator (Harvie 106).

The expectation of change followed the First World War and the 1918 Representation of the People Act; those who held socialist sympathies were optimistic, especially in light of the first Labour government in 1924. But the revolution which many had hoped for did not come, and the electorate were faced with the General Strike of 1926 and what many viewed as a betrayal by Ramsay MacDonald with the formation of a National Government in 1931. Political novelists captured these feelings with criticisms of politicians and Parliament, and none more sharply than Howard Spring in *Fame is the Spur* (1940).

Spring's novel has a large cast, populated with real political figures such as Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald, and spans decades of British history from the Peterloo Massacre to the First World War. Spring uses imitation in forming his more central characters: the abandonment of the working class by the politician protagonist Hamer Shawcross is generally accepted as an intended parallel to MacDonald's own apparent lack of loyalty (Harvie 191). The unfavourable comparison made with Shawcross by his childhood friend and trade unionist, Arnold Ryerson, as well as his abandonment of the miners and support for the First World War makes Shawcross not only a convincing stand-in for MacDonald, but also the Labour Party itself. Spring's experience reporting on political events and the insights he provides into the feelings of his characters ultimately allows him to create a vibrant image of a man struggling against the establishment before he is absorbed into it, showing his inner conflict and pressures both political and private acting upon him. The impact of this strain is only

compounded by the brief glances forward the novel takes at the older Shawcross, his perceived betrayal unsatisfyingly rewarded by a seat in the House of Lords. 'He is a Faust,' Harvie writes, 'deceived by his own ability and self-confidence' (Harvie 191).

Though the post-Second World War period saw the portrayal of politics and democracy under threat in the thriller genre, it was also host to a reappearance of the parliamentary novel penned by political figures in the manner of Disraeli. Labour MP Maurice Edelman's novels, such as *The Minister* (1961) and *The Prime Minister's Daughter* (1964) are written in the Trollope form, using Parliament as a setting for romance and personal melodrama whilst eschewing any strong exploration of political ideas or the clash of ideologies (Fielding 114-115). Yet the backbench MP offers both insight and access, displaying to audiences how the pressures of Westminster could affect an elected servant whilst casting the politician in a sympathetic light. Here, the political and personal are in direct competition, with personal pressures threatening the careers of politicians and the strain that accompanies their political activity straining the stability of their private lives. For Edelman, however, whilst its servants might fall, Parliament remained.

C. P. Snow's *Corridors of Power* (1964) engages far more readily with the concerns and ideologies of its era, making nuclear disarmament the objective of Roger Quaife, its principal. *Corridors of Power* is primarily a novel about the exercise of power, and it portrays the interplay of personal and political substance through its depiction of 'how power interacts with personality, even among the elite – with foibles, private hates and love' (Watson 597). Although Quaife presents himself as an honourable if ambitious man who wishes to do the right thing, his affair with Ellen Smith and the abandonment of his cause by his former allies are evidence of a less positive picture of Parliament than Edelman creates. Snow's experience as a Junior Minister allows for a convincing sketch of the titular corridors, offering an authentic-seeming view on government and how a politician must operate within it if they are to accomplish their goals.

Not all politicians present so pleasant a picture of Parliament. Chris Mullin's *A Very British Coup* (1982) played upon the beliefs that right-wing elements had conspired to undermine Howard Wilson's administration, as well as the prominence of the hard-left Tony Benn in the Labour Party (Mullin, 'When the threat of a coup'). In this novel, the political substance of the novel is charged with unease and paranoia, stemming from the suspicion that such an attempt to destabilise a democracy might be based in

fact: a result of Mullin's reliance on current attitudes and his own position as a politician. The novel similarly uses the tensions of its day, such as that surrounding cruise missiles and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament; this provided a perfect atmosphere for the novel's release, playing upon fears of both conspiracy and socialism in Downing Street (Mullin, 'When the threat of a coup').

Far darker is Michael Dobbs' 1989 work, *House of Cards*. Now British democracy is under attack from within, as Chief Whip Francis Urquhart topples his Premier before disposing of his rivals for the position. Unlike Mullin, Dobbs was not responding to historical or political events; the writing of the novel and its narrative were prompted by his personal experiences in Westminster, with the sense that the reader would be receiving an insider's access to Whitehall and Downing Street adding to the appeal of the political conspiracy (Chakelian, 'House of Cards'). Dobbs can demonstrate political processes and action skilfully, portraying the emotions of those under siege from Urquhart with the result that we are constantly aware of the cost of Urquhart's ambition, and how his own personal aspirations corrupt and debase the political system.

In recent times, there are still works written or co-authored by those with experience in the political scene: political journalists Andrew Marr and Gavin Esler are among those who have produced such works. Marr's *Head of State* (2014) is a rare political comedy, which manages to fit in an element of farcical conspiracy whilst at the same time addressing a key political event: the EU referendum. His subsequent political fiction, *Children of the Master* (Marr, 2015) contains a far more competent conspiracy surrounding the election of a new Prime Minister and their subsequent manipulation. Esler's *A Scandalous Man* (2008) handles its political substance differently, splitting the narrative between a Thatcherite minister furthering the British-American special relationship in the 1980s and his son, living in London during the War on Terror. The novel addresses attitudes and events from both periods, linking them together and populating the novel with characters for whom these political events hold a deep meaning.

All three of these works offer a sense of the parliamentary machine driving the action of the novel, with *Children of the Master* and *A Scandalous Man* containing characters who interact closely with the mechanics of government. In all three cases, however, there is little indication of how the political activity within the novel affects



its characters, with the drama of the story coming, like many popular political novels, from affairs and murders.

Richard T. Kelly's *The Knives* (2016) is a far more ambitious work, offering a complex examination of the life of a Conservative Home Secretary. The novel is populated by realistic individuals rather than political clichés, and whilst Kelly cannot offer the same insider knowledge as Disraeli or Edelman, the work is well researched, offering an intense psychological exploration of the modern politician. Kelly ensures that the novel's political context is prominent, including elements such as a divided Tory Party, immigration debates and the fear of radical fundamentalism. It is too early to tell whether this novel and the flurry of chaotic political activity following its release heralds a new wave of literary political fiction, but Kelly's work possesses the same emotional and psychological force as that which was produced by Meredith or Spring.

Whilst the novels examined so far in this literature review have all dealt primarily with the established political system, whether in Parliament or through election scenes, there are many works that do not focus upon parliamentary politics, but which portray the political scene, its events and the feeling present in a manner which fills the work with a political purpose. Two prominent examples of novels that take this approach, and which this literature review will examine, are Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).

*The Secret Agent* takes as its inspiration the real attempt to blow up Greenwich Observatory and the fear of attacks in London perpetrated by foreign anarchists: a frequent part of the discussion for MPs and journalists (Knepper 296). Conrad's depiction of the capital city, thought by some critics to be the principal character of the novel, and its inhabitants form an exploration of a society in which these events and the story of Verloc could take place: one which he portrays as one of stolid English moderation (Howe 95). The combination of politics and personal feeling are prominent, made particularly clear in one passage: 'the way of even the most justifiable revolutions is prepared by personal impulses disguised into creeds' (Conrad 60).

In Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the chief city of Airstrip One was a London transformed, but the trappings and events were those Orwell thought probable whilst addressing contemporary events. The betrayal of a popular revolution by those who would establish a totalitarian state was clearly inspired by Stalinism in Russia. Parliament does not exist to be explored, though the novel is intensely political,

exploring the politics of a totalitarian state, of human relationships and of language, the contemporary version of which Orwell thought lacked the vocabulary to frame these political issues correctly (*Why I Write* 114-115). Though his work was borne from his strident opposition to Stalinism, Orwell was a staunch supporter of the 1945 Labour government, and his work was not intended to be a commentary or criticism of Attlee's administration as much as it was a warning against the potential for totalitarianism to emerge following the Second World War (Schneer 202-203). In this work, the relationship between the political and personal has been greatly disturbed, causing trace emotion to be an inherently political and seditious act. It is one limit to which the relationship may be stretched, the politics entirely absorbing the personal, but the connection still exists in Orwell's novel.

Looking back over this corpus of political fiction, it is clear that the political novel has several qualities that are prominent throughout the genre's existence. Most noticeable is the novel's relationship with its own context: it is a response to, commentary on or protest against the attitudes and events from the time in which it was written. Even when the author creates a fictional location, whether it is Loamshire or Airstrip One, the writing is informed by and resonates with the atmosphere of its period.

In addition, the political novel presents its politics alongside or bound to the personal feeling of the political individual, used by many political authors to create an internal conflict that gives their writing its tension and energy. Linked to this factor, the political novel is often created by someone with considerable experience in the political sphere, whether this is an MP, civil servant or journalist. It has been asserted by multiple critics, including Harvie (65-66) and Fielding (30), that the access that this experience can offer the reader that has formed a major part of the genre's career: *The President is Missing* (2018) was touted on the sole fact that former-President Bill Clinton's name was on the cover (O'Sullivan), and one cannot discount the success of works and adaptations by parliamentary insiders such as Michael Dobbs and Jeffrey Archer.

We are left, then, with a sense of the political novel's form and purpose, which can be combined with its definition already determined. The novel's appeal for the reader is the work's communion with the period and the attitudes surrounding the key events of the age, the ability of the fiction to merge "entertainment" and ideology' and the sense that we, as readers, are able to look into a world to which we are still not

permitted full access (Harvie 2). If a writer is to attempt to produce a political novel, then it is with these appeals in mind that they must proceed, rather than relying upon the placement of a thriller narrative placed within familiar political settings. This is what I have tried to accomplish in producing my own political novel.

## CHAPTER TWO

One of the initial problems I have encountered in attempting to represent politics within a novel has been the difficulty of including the fiction's subject matter without disrupting the narrative. The obstacle that politics poses has been present and confronted since the genre's inception. One of the genre's earliest writers, Humphry Ward, commented upon her need whilst writing *Robert Elsmere* (1888) 'to suggest the argument, that both the expert and the popular consciousness might feel its force – to do this without overstepping the bounds of fiction; without turning into mere ratiocination' (qtd. in Speare 24). Seventy years later, following the production of many and varied works that attempted to situate political thought and action within their narratives, Irving Howe spoke of the 'insoluble pellets of modern ideology' in his 1957 study of politics within the novel (Howe 20). From the genre's origins, the political novelist will be faced with the difficulty of placing it within their literature without its presence causing an irreconcilable disruption from which it is difficult to recover, always aware of its 'potential of destroying a novel's vitality' (Kemme 8).

Through my attempts to depict politics in *A Northern Exit*, I have discovered that politics can pose a threat to a novel in two major ways. The first of these are the political beliefs that the work espouses, as many works of political fiction do. In 1924, Speare saw these as the key component of the political novel, stating that the works of the genre 'must be dominated, more often than not, by *ideas* rather than by *emotions*' (Speare 23). Their inclusion within a work has the ability to vitalise events and characters; in his 1987 study of Allen Drury's political novels, Tom Kemme notes how its presence 'minimizes the political novelist's risk of creating short lived or ephemeral fiction' (Kemme 8). Yet it is a complicated matter to express this form of ideals through fiction within the novel, and the political author must always be aware of the novel's balance between their opinions and the work's aesthetics. Ideology's abstract nature, as Irving Howe terms it, means that it is 'likely to be recalcitrant whenever an attempt is made to incorporate it into the novel's stream of sensuous impression' (Howe 20). Addressing the lack of political fiction in America from the 1930s to the 1940s, James Davidson attributed some responsibility to the highly propagandist nature of the soapbox novel, warning, 'if the propaganda element predominates, characterization and plot inevitably suffer' (Davidson 856). This difficulty is compounded by the risk of the work being rejected as a consequence of

these belief systems by those whose ideals stand in opposition to them: it is impossible, particularly in politics, to please everyone.

The second difficulty is that which is offered by the political activity described within the novel. Even a novelist with experience in representing their constituents might struggle to depict the correct workings of Westminster and Whitehall. In his 2000 retrospective of political novels produced by politicians, Labour MP Denis MacShane claimed that such works inevitably faced ‘demands of simplification and exaggeration’ that ‘render accounts of parliamentary or ministerial life nonsensical to an MP’ (MacShane 130). Michael Dobbs sums up his experience of Parliament from the 1970s to the 1980s most plainly in *House of Cards*: ‘Life in the Commons can be exhilarating, occasionally historic, but that is not the norm. The norm is crap’ (Dobbs, Kindle location 1239).

Between the necessity of first-hand experience of the political process, combined with the ‘mind-numbing boredom and minutiae and chance dramas of the Commons’, it is clear that a faithfully accurate mirror of politics in a work of political fiction would have a disruptive effect on the narrative of all but the most accomplished writer (MacShane 130). It is therefore the political novelist’s task to convey the significance of their characters’ movements within their political domain without needing to stall this motion with lengthy exposition, whilst remaining aware of the lack of a political knowledge from those readers who ‘are not conversant with or interested in government and the processes of government’ (Kempe 6). The task is similar to that faced by the historical novelist, who must similarly depict a world and its motions with accuracy whilst neither presuming knowledge on their reader’s part nor allowing explanation or elucidation to sap the force of their characters’ interaction with the period.

With these points in mind, it is clear that the political novelist is faced from the outset with the problems their subject matter poses to their attempts to represent it within fiction. The first is the potential the ideology with which they imbue their work possesses for detracting from the ability of its narrative to attract and entertain its readers. The second is the complex and unwieldy nature of the mechanics of politics, which presents a similar problem whilst forcing the author to present a simplified or streamlined portrayal of political action that can still claim a measure of accuracy. In the early stages of planning and writing *A Northern Exit*, one of my goals was to develop a means through which to alleviate or circumvent these issues.

In terms of the first challenge, despite the risks to the novel posed by the ideology contained within it, I was reluctant to try to suppress the ideas from which the novel had formed. In the final draft of *A Northern Exit*, the ideas it is concerned with are primarily the disconnect that seems to have developed over the past several years between the political establishment and the electorate, as well as the increasingly partisan nature of politics. These ideas are of key importance to the narrative and had both shaped and driven its writing. Literature, particularly literature that concerns itself with politics, is a product of ideas and opinions and those ideas should maintain their prominence within the novel. Reflecting upon his own work in 1946, George Orwell states, ‘it is invariably where I lacked a *political* purpose that I wrote lifeless books’ (*Why I Write* 10). I did not wish for the novel to lose its connection to the ideas that had led to or developed from its writing, believing that to allow this would be to weaken the force of the writing.

Consequently, if the political thought and ideas within the novel were to be of central importance and present within the narrative, then what needed to be determined next was how these ideas might be included within the text without causing a disruption to the writing and allowing the author’s beliefs and principles to dominate both character and plot. One of the approaches I took, prompted by my research into the political fiction canon and its academic criticism, was to imbue the political content (here I refer to my political views contained within the novel and its exploration of political processes) with a deep personal significance. The use of the term ‘personal’ here should be understood to mean relating to the private lives of the characters populating the novel, affecting their relationships or individual emotional states. In *Politics and the Novel* (1957), Howe expresses his belief that the ideal form of the political novel should be a work of ‘internal tensions’, namely that which occurs between ‘the usual representation between human experience and feeling’ and its ideology (Howe 20). For all the difficulty that Howe states absorbing ideology into one’s narrative presents to the author, it is this conflict and strain between the two that he claims is the novel’s foremost asset.

My aim, therefore, was to merge the personal and the political elements of the novel together throughout the novel as much as was possible: to make political events and action possess private and subjective meaning to its characters – a quality we see fully-formed in Julian and watch develop within Tom – and so too the readers. In the earliest political works, produced in the nineteenth century, ‘the emotional and psychological

life of men and women within a political situation forms the significant content of the novel' (Woodcock 680). It was this model that I sought to emulate with my own writing, concerning myself with the motivations and inner thoughts of characters who interact with the political events populating the novel. Through this approach, it was my intention that the political subject matter would be absorbed into the fiction's affect and thus become a vital force within the novel rather than an impersonal entity that could stall the narrative. Speare may wish for political fiction to favour ideas over emotions, but to take this as a formal requirement risks losing some of the most vigorous examples of the genre, the strength of which arose from their willingness to expose and combine their ideas with the heat of their characters' emotions and so bring forth an effective and memorable representation of politics.

As a part of this approach, an early decision was to make the novel's principal political subject a single scheme or policy. It was my hope that this controlled focus would allow me to prevent the political subject matter of the novel from becoming too nebulous or unwieldy. In the case of national politics and the career of an MP, there are many interrelated and complex aspects. Rather than to attempt to isolate one facet of this whole and so risk bowdlerising or damaging the authenticity of my representation, I considered it prudent for the novel to concern itself with one major political process removed from the traditions and intricate practices of Westminster. This is a form that has served political fiction well; a number of political novels have one or two proposals or problems for their characters to champion or struggle with. These issues are often present in the context in which the novel is produced: Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845) takes as its focus the plight of the working class, whereas *Corridors of Power* (1960) is centred on the question of nuclear disarmament.

During the planning stages, it was my intention that the political detail of the novel would be primarily focused upon devolution in the North East of England, with the inclusion of other notable political developments when relevant. Devolution appeared well suited to this task. Its positioning in the North East would allow the characters concerned with its development to grant it a greater portion of their attention than might be afforded by and MP or Cabinet Minister. It was an optimistic and vibrant policy, seemingly offering considerable prospects for the region: self-governance and significant funding for development and growth. The North East focus also allowed there to be a link between Julian and T. Dan Smith: a dynamic and controversial figure

from Newcastle's political history, allowing reflection upon a factual and emotionally-charged political story.

In the novel's original form, devolution would have been the primary focus for Julian's energies, with my intention being to see him become Mayor of the North East before being brought down by allegations of corruption. Tom was to be caught between the desire to help his mentor and the knowledge that Julian is guilty of what he stands accused, even though his goals are noble. His wish for devolution to succeed would be both a personal and political aspiration for Julian on account of his history with Newcastle and his desire to improve prospects for the region; in a heartfelt speech to Tom, his fists clenched, Julian states the situation: 'Devolution *has* to work. Whoever ends up running it needs to *make it* work' (ANE 64). The impassioned manner in which Julian would address devolution and the desperation he would display in the face of the challenges was intended to transform the scheme from a political process into an engaging force within the narrative.

Following the EU referendum, however, it became clear that devolution would, at least, not take place in the form or timescale that had previously been confirmed, and it would thus be extremely difficult to make it the subject of *A Northern Exit*. My own uncertainty over how to proceed is mirrored by the reaction of Julian in the novel: he is paralysed by the political ambiguity and the loss of his sole aim, vanishing from the narrative for a number of chapters but for a single text message which reads, prophetically, '*I don't think we're going to get much done*' (ANE 125). That Julian is absent and that the narrative concerns itself with witnessing developments through Tom's eyes and the relationship between Tom and Sonia is a consequence of my real indecision over how to proceed with the novel's political content and, linked to that, Julian's own movements.

My approach to this setback was comprised of two amendments. In the short term, I found it necessary to create a new scheme at which Julian could direct his energies. Because of the proposed housing policy he authors following the EU referendum, Julian can continue to move in a political manner, trying to remain relevant within a shifting political scene. This allows the tension within the novel to be maintained, as Julian is not simply stuck in a static state, merely shifting out of politics. By championing this scheme, Julian continues to have a great deal to lose: both his position and his attempt to regain prominence, in his mind, depend upon the realisation of his proposal. Tom describes the proposed policy as 'a lifeline: a piece of purpose



that he was using to hold himself upright' (*ANE* 173). I have not, however, expunged devolution from the novel: it is still a vital part of the politics of the North East in the period, and the emotion with which Julian addresses the issue drives much of *A Northern Exit*'s movement in the early chapters. Rather, following the loss of devolution as a force within the novel and Julian's primary interest, the housing scheme is a functional policy that allows Julian to continue to struggle against the realities of national politics whilst at the same time bringing him into conflict with Uncle Andrew and Ken Johnson.

Yet whilst the introduction of a new policy allows Julian to continue grapple with politics, this presented a problem in terms of Julian's personal investment in devolution. Transferring the passion he had previously held for devolution, which had driven the majority of his decisions and dictated his emotional state within the novel, to a less significant policy (one primarily confined to Newcastle rather than the North East as a whole) risked invalidating this same enthusiasm. Works of political fiction based around a policy or system keep their subject central throughout. Much of the difficulty I faced in deciding how to reintroduce Julian into the novel following the referendum was due to the seeming impossibility of how to replicate his energy without this damaging the authenticity of his personal interaction with devolution.

In order to avoid weakening the established link between the personal and political as portrayed by Julian's commitment to devolution, and so risk weakening the representation of the novel's political subject matter, my approach is to broaden his fervour for a single policy into a deep conviction for the institution of politics. Of all the characters in *A Northern Exit*, politics possesses the most personal significance for Julian Ashworth. Julian's most prominent characteristic is his devotion to the political institution: it is a world he exists in entirely prior to his ejection. Describing his mentor, Tom states that the 'only thing I've seen him do outside of politics is drink and occasionally sulk' (*ANE* 163). Unlike many within the political arena, Julian is not concerned with the money he can make or the personal benefits his position offers him. For Julian, politics and his place within it is not the means to some other end; his desire to inhabit this domain is his foremost motivation throughout the novel, and much of the tension within the novel comes as a result of this aspiration being threatened by the realities of national politics.

In attempting to bring the political detail and the emotional substance of the narrative together and thus charge the novel's politics with a personal energy, I

constructed the relationship between Julian and the politics of the nation as though it was not the connection between a man and an institution, but rather a romantic bond between two characters. Tom and Sonia both comment upon Julian's lack of a partner, but his ardour for the political is written in such a way to evoke personal affection. Even when an old photograph of Julian with a woman is found in his study, her identity remains a mystery, an implied personal attachment that Julian shows no sign of retaining and which pales in comparison to his relationship with politics (*ANE* 86). When Tom first notices his mentor's enthusiasm, he comments that when politics is discussed, 'it was as though a kind of light came on behind his eyes' (*ANE* 24). The relationship between Julian and politics also takes the form of a failing love affair as the distance between the two grows; Julian feels increasingly betrayed by the system to which he is devoted, becoming despondent before they finally part ways.

This particular aspect of Julian's connection to politics is reinforced by the fact that the challenges Julian suffers throughout the novel typically come as a consequence of national developments threatening his position, which he is attempting to use to regain access to the political institution. What Boyers calls 'a combination of external circumstance and the ideas that erect an imposing perception of circumstance' in his examination of the post-World War Two political novel is key to Julian's role within the novel, as the politics to which he is devoted continues to deny him greater proximity or influence (*Atrocity* 5). When Gateshead's exit from the devolution agreement and the EU referendum damage Julian's ability to become Mayor of the North East, both events are intended to resemble a conflict between romantic partners; Julian isolates himself from his own party, confiding in Tom, who attempts to support and reinvigorate him. Julian's attempts to draw nearer to politics are destabilised by political events, and his emotional responses to this would not be inappropriate for one going through difficulties in a romantic relationship.

In representing Julian's commitment to the political as though it was a romance, the political setbacks he faces are written with the intention of delivering a personal blow to the character comparable to the gradual collapse of a relationship. His reactions to these events are presented primarily in emotional terms, and it is the desperate despondency he feels when his political position and future is threatened which is key to Julian's character and drives the majority of his actions, including the punch he throws and the creation of his new housing scheme. Through Tom, we are able to witness the personal toll Julian feels in the wake of the continuous

developments driving him further from national politics. These vary in intensity throughout the novel, from ‘brief expressions of moroseness’ (*ANE* 33) to Tom morbidly picturing Julian ‘screaming incoherently’ (*ANE* 150). Following Julian’s definitive exit from politics and the election of Donald Trump, representing the final collapse of his relationship with the political, Julian’s emotional state is such that he is handled by Tom, Sonia and Andrew as though he is an unexploded bomb, with Tom regarding him as ‘something fragile, which might at any moment shatter. Or explode.’ (*ANE* 244).

This response that Julian exhibits to his slow separation from politics supplies much of the novel’s tension whilst demonstrating the importance of the national and international events taking place throughout the narrative. His silence following the decision to leave the European Union is punctuated by Tom distractedly considering more than once the possibility of Julian committing suicide (*ANE* 135 and 150). In the novel’s closing chapters, Julian’s final departure from politics is intended to suggest death more than resignation. Though Julian appears twice following this development, both of these instances are written as though he is more spectre than living human. There is none of the energy or vivid temperament which was a prominent part of his character when he meets with Tom and Sonia, but rather a sombre peacefulness and the absence of all which had characterised him until this point: ‘No news, no politics and no depression’ (*ANE* 269). When Julian exits the scene, the suggestion of this ghostly nature returns, as ‘Nobody looked at him; nobody recognised him’ (*ANE* 269). Like an apparition, he vanishes suddenly from sight. This is repeated during the epilogue, as Tom believes that he has seen Julian at the rally in support of Jeremy Corbyn. Once again, Julian appears and fades from sight, his presence a sign that he still haunts both politics and Tom.

The use of these ghostlike descriptions is intended to not only demonstrate the impact of the novel’s politics upon Julian’s character, but to imbue real political events with a psychological force by evoking some of the language used to describe both Brexit and Trump. In a number of cases, discussions of anxiety, depression and suicide have been used by those effected by both political developments (Quinn, ‘Sleepless, Anxious, Depressed’). The imagery of death and suicide surrounding Julian’s despondency and his ambiguous presence at the novel’s close is present in order to reflect sentiments from the period, calling to attention the passionate response to these political events (Bulman, “‘I felt suicidal’”).

The personal reactions detailed above, of key importance to the development and roundedness of Julian's character and a significant aspect of his final fall, are all prompted by the novel's political events and the threat they pose to Julian's proximity to politics. Through addressing these events in a personal manner via the emotional and psychological toll they take upon Julian, my goal was to infuse the political content of the novel with an impassioned sentiment that would see them absorbed into the personal narratives of the novel's cast, presented almost as a character with which these individuals can interact.

Yet one difficulty in trying to create this bond between the personal and political elements of the narrative was the risk of creating a character whose personality is so committed to an ideology, as Julian's is to the political institution, that they are presented solely in terms of the ideals which they espouse. Such characters, whilst of great use to the political substance of the novel, risk losing the roundedness of character or psychological complexity that makes for a compelling and dynamic figure, and I was thus aware of the need to make Julian a fully-formed, three-dimensional character. If the effects of the novel's political substance are to register upon the reader, then they must have some investment in Julian's wellbeing, and so it is important that he be presented as a realistic individual for whom it would be possible to feel sympathy. Consequently, I attempted to limit the amount that Julian himself voices his wish to exist within the political sphere or his devotion to it; that is almost always inferred by Tom in his narration rather than through his reporting of Julian's words. Though always preoccupied with the politics that surround him, Julian is capable of having friendly conversations over drinks or teasing Tom over his love life. Whilst his commitment to the institution of politics is made clear through either discussion or debate, it is primarily seen through his reactions to developments, and for the reader to feel the force of this it was important that he was an authentic character with which we can relate, rather than merely a symbol for faith in establishment politics. When devolution is discussed, Julian's energy and optimism should be felt by the reader; when these hopes are dashed, the full force of his crushing disappointment and frustration at his political impotence should similarly resonate.

Having explored this first method of melding the personal and political elements of the novel, this chapter will now examine the second approach that I employ within *Northern Exit* to achieve this and so strengthen the representation of politics within the fiction. This is accomplished through the growth and maturation of Tom within

the framework of a political story. Tom had originally not spent much of his time in Newcastle outside the company of Julian in earlier drafts of *A Northern Exit*, and his opinions on the political situation were not as prominent as Julian's own concerns and beliefs. That Tom's views on the political situation became more evident is another result of EU referendum result and the loss of North East devolution. As Julian's story was concentrated upon his growing distance from politics, Tom's own role in the novel transformed into that of a young man coming of age during a turbulent political period. Throughout the novel, we are aware of Tom's inner thoughts and motivations and so we are able to witness his development as it takes place within the political framework of devolution, Brexit and Donald Trump's election.

This device, presenting the journey of the politician through the *bildungsroman* form, was heavily featured amongst the early entries of the political fiction genre and was deftly utilised by Disraeli in his Political Trilogy. Perhaps due to the perceived shift towards a negative or apathetic view towards politicians in more recent times, there have been few fresh political *bildungsroman* narratives, requiring inspiration for Tom's journey throughout the novel to be taken from the genre's origins (Bailey 288). The clearest examples of such narratives can be found in *Coningsby* and *Phineas Finn*.

In his 1979 analysis of *Coningsby*, Robert O'Kell claims that the novel's political tract 'is very much subordinate to the *bildungsroman* in which Harry Coningsby, Esq. finds the sources of his fulfillment' (O'Kell 58). Although our introduction to *Coningsby* makes it clear that the protagonist is already a well-formed individual, he still undergoes a development in both political and private terms, most notably at his first meeting with Sidonia, where he receives the instruction and enlightenment that persuades him to embark on a career in politics in a similar fashion to the way in which Tom's political journey begins with his meal with Julian. His social consciousness and sense of responsibility as one with the required abilities and social rank to drive reform is further developed during visits to Manchester at Sidonia's suggestion, where he views both the marvels of an industrial city and the poverty of its working classes. His relationship with Millbank, a wealthy manufacturer, allows him to witness a more principled means of production, thus further enlightening the young nobleman, and this too was a device I sought to emulate in Tom's own development through his exploration of Newcastle and Gateshead.

Trollope also made use of the figure of the 'young man making his way in politics', in which 'various individuals were inducted (or not inducted) into the political world'

(Harvie 92). Rather than an aristocratic individual already half-formed into the figure he must become at the end of his journey, Trollope's Phineas Finn is an outsider in a number of ways, both in terms of his Irish identity and his socioeconomic status as a doctor's son. Tom also spends the majority of the novel as an outsider, though in the case of *A Northern Exit*, this stems from his upbringing in London and his family's wealth when he is placed in Newcastle. Finn's own *bildungsroman* takes the form of his struggle to exist simultaneously within the two worlds of his Irish background and the English Parliament, and Finn must overcome both the disadvantages of his nationality and his own inexperience of parliamentary procedure; this latter area of Finn's development is also shared by Tom. Over the course of the novel, Finn manages to reconcile his awkwardness as an MP and his loyalties to Ireland, becoming a radical and backing an Irish land reform bill, finally deciding to sacrifice his government position in favour of his own personal convictions.

At the close of Disraeli's work, Coningsby's political education leads him into Parliament, not as a part of his grandfather's variety of Toryism, but as a representative of the New Conservatism, which the novel implies he will be faithful to. Finn, though he re-emerges into British politics both in *Phineas Redux* and *The Prime Minister*, rejects political success that would come at the cost of his principles. In Tom's case, neither political genius nor a dynamic career in Westminster results from his development, only the means by which he can mature further. He remains a political outsider, his parting from Julian representing the more modern attitudes of disenchantment with politics in Britain. Tom does not, however, reject political activity and so abandon the development that he has gained, and the novel's epilogue shows him taking part in the canvassing prior to the 2017 general election. We are shown the progress Tom makes by contrasting his reaction with other characters following the referendum, including Sonia, his family and Julian himself. What is key to Tom's maturation is that this growth comes through his continued interaction with the political, and it is the politics within the novel that prompt his development. This is the case whether his exploration of Newcastle whilst discussing devolution opens his eyes to the need for investment in the North East or whether the EU referendum result causes him to evaluate his privileged position and lack of social understanding.

Yet although this approach does bind the narrative's personal and political elements closely together, it also has the potential to threaten the representation of politics within the novel that this combination of the personal and political is intended to

strengthen. A difficulty in making political events the key cause of Tom's development, and in having a major part of his growth being related to the way in which he perceives these events, is how political beliefs might be implied or inferred from the conclusions at which Tom arrives. Kemme warns of the polarising nature of ideologies within political novels, warning that the novelist 'runs the risk that what the author perceives to be knowledge or truth (the way the world really is) will be viewed by some readers as a shallow understanding of reality' (Kemme 9). This is certainly the case in the work of Kemme's subject of study, Allen Drury, whose work constantly depicted liberalism's inability to confront a communist threat (McDowell 87). Tom's realisation that the political class had failed to consider the attitudes and needs of the electorate is a central part of his development and the means by which his growth is tied to the novel's politics: it reveals his own failure to do this. Yet making this idea such a prominent part of Tom's maturation gives the impression that this conclusion possesses an ideological authenticity, placing the novel in opposition to alternate views of Brexit. Obtrusive political creeds can serve to bring one out of their willing suspension of disbelief and immersion within the literature, and there is little likely to make an ideology more conspicuous than when it clashes with the beliefs of those who read it. One cannot expect a novelist to be all things to all people, particularly when dealing with politics, which 'rakes our passions as nothing else' (Howe 24). Yet it would be unwise to write a political novel in the hopes of convincing or converting those who would dispute Tom's belief most fiercely; such persuasion may be possible but should not be a realistic aim of the novelist.

This presence of political beliefs and ideologies was the most problematic issue in the writing of this novel. Whilst Julian is more involved with political activity than Tom, his political convictions are rarely represented in terms of Labour or Tory, left or right. One can infer upon which side he might fall on most political issues owing to his place within the Labour Party, but I had written Julian intending for his love of the political system to be a far more visible aspect of his character than his implied loyalties to the left wing. His devotion to the institution of politics remains strong even whilst representing the Opposition: a bipartisan loyalty. For Tom, whose growing left-wing loyalties have greater visibility on account of his first-person narrative, it is more difficult to suppress what disruption might result from this.

My solution to this problem, insofar as it is possible to provide one, is to prevent Tom's political stance from becoming the topic of a discussion between characters

and so to avoid being placed in a position of having to render a concrete judgement upon his beliefs or using them to challenge dissenting views. Discussing politics and the novel, Orhan Pamuk claims, ‘the very strength of the art of the novel is that the writer identifies with the character he creates with such great intensity that no moral judgment should be passed on a character’ (Pamuk 92). Taking this approach in reference to Tom’s emerging political awareness and the political convictions held by the novel’s characters, I attempted to present Tom’s growth without the suggestion that his conclusions nullify dissenting points of view, but merely that his beliefs are reasonable. In a similar fashion, I wrote confrontations based around incompatible ideological stances without portraying one position as superior to another. Julian and Ken Johnson’s clash is partly fuelled by Johnson’s Euroscepticism, but much of the heat is provided by Julian’s desire for political prominence: their political positions are not under review so much as Julian’s personal motivations. This is not a perfect response to this issue, with which one is met whenever writing a political novel. Yet in this case, it seems more important that one should attend more to the case that the ideology is not conspicuous enough to result in a cross-party disruption to the narrative. In anticipation of partisan resistance to the political beliefs their fiction contains, the novelist should consider the novel their chance to bring their views into the discussion, even in the face of dissent. Surveying the history of the American political novel, Milne concludes, ‘Even if the reader refuses to accept the thesis, he feels his own commitments complicated and is altered and even “enriched” by the work’ (Milne 8). Conversion may not be possible, but discussion should be encouraged. Perhaps that, and the ability to entertain, is the most that a political novelist can hope for.

To summarise the findings of this chapter so far, it would appear that the first challenge in representing political detail within a novel is ensuring that these elements do not cause a disruption to the narrative, either by causing a halt to explore or explain procedure, mechanics or tradition and thus sapping the writing of its vitality, or by alienating readers through the inclusion of these unfamiliar components. In order to alleviate this, in writing this novel I have presented the politics described as if they held a personal significance to the principal characters: Julian’s relationship with the political is primarily described in terms of his private motivations; Tom’s personal growth throughout the novel is prompted most visibly by his interactions with the novel’s political detail. Through this merging of the personal and political, it is my



intention that the political events and action the reader encounters will both form a driving force that propels the narrative whilst at the same holding meaning for the characters beyond its political consequences.

However, whilst the methods described so far have merged the political and the personal through the use of affect in response to political events, there is a second manner in which this novel brings together its private and political elements: the presentation of personal relationships in a political manner. The decision to make use of this device was made as a result of the unexpected absence of devolution, which was to have been a key factor in the novel's climax. Owing to its absence, and with the political action within the novel being addressed in a more distant fashion through Julian's relationship with the political institution and their role in Tom's maturation, the climax of the novel seemed fated to be more concerned with the personal than the political.

The personal element is an important component to the political novel. Disraeli's political trilogy contained romance; Trollope's own works were rarely without a love story (Harvie 93). Parliamentary novels by Maurice Edelman and C. P. Snow contained affairs between politicians, or love stories between the politician and a member of the electorate. The personal has always and still has its place within the political narrative; as Boyers warns, 'there is no advantage in regarding a work as a political fiction if in doing so we are simply encouraged to think personal relations trivial and political conflicts important' (*Atrocity* 15). Contrasted with political machinations and democratic manoeuvring, personal conflicts can offer something universal to the reader: an element to which readers who lack political expertise can connect and the stakes of which are clear to everyone. Yet whilst the personal relationships and psychologies of characters are of paramount importance to the political novel, they have the potential to distract from the political themes if not written with attention paid to the impact both elements of the fiction can have upon each other. Often the scenes of purely personal interest within a political story are represented as an escape from the strictures of the political environment, especially for the character of the beleaguered politician. Tom himself retreats from the political to an arena of explicitly personal relationships, notably when he abandons the EU referendum broadcast to join Sonia in bed. Yet if this personal portion of the novel is to exist, which it should, then the task of the novelist is to encourage a symbiosis

between it and their political material. If accomplished, such an interdependence can elevate both the personal and the political within the literature.

The most strained personal connection in the novel is between Julian and Sonia. Alongside Tom's coming of age and Julian's exile from the political institution, the rivalry between Julian and Sonia as both strengthen their relationship with Tom is one of the novel's major storylines, and its fraught nature made it the most appropriate from which to build towards the novel's climax. I was, however, reluctant to make the focus of the novel's most tense scene a purely personal one within a political novel. Though Julian's relationship with politics is an important factor of the climax, as his fraught emotional state provokes the confrontation, in earlier drafts references to politics were conspicuous by their absence owing to Julian's lack of political agency, creating the sense that the political scenes were doing little more than providing a context for the clash.

To remedy this, I addressed the interactions between Julian and Sonia throughout the novel, attempting to create a sense of the political within these scenes by giving their disagreement an ideological basis. In previous drafts, Julian and Sonia's dispute was of a personal nature, as was its climax, but following these revisions Julian and Sonia's increasing closeness to Tom is presented with the intention of resembling campaigns to gain votes for an upcoming election. Both try to attract Tom to them through what they represent throughout the novel. Julian embodies the political, which Tom is able to access through their association. Sonia's conversations with Tom contain a personal dimension and spur his maturation, yet Tom's scenes with her are often presented in the novel as an escape from politics, making her appeal on a far more personal level than Julian does. This is made most clear during Julian and Sonia's discussion of political fiction. Sonia states her preference for Trollope and Julian champions Disraeli, a fellow politician. Their beliefs are reinforced as Julian dismisses Trollope's works for being 'all propped up with romance: patched up so people didn't notice all the gaps in his knowledge', and Sonia states about Disraeli, 'if I wanted a commentary on the state of the nation, I'd read a manifesto' (*ANE* 111). Their campaigns lead them to attack each other's positions: Julian undermines the personal appeal that Sonia offers by playing upon Tom's uncertainty regarding her parents' resistance to the relationship, whilst Sonia threatens Julian's remaining political capital by revealing his planned housing policy to Tom's uncle. The campaign ends

with a single vote cast by the sole member of the electorate; Tom leaves the restaurant with Sonia, throwing his support behind her.

The more ideological nature of this discord, combined with the political manoeuvring both parties engage in, is intended to mirror the novel's major political event: the EU referendum. The result has a similar meaning for Julian: once again, he has managed to misread the desires and attitudes of the electorate, and it is with this second political defeat that he finally passes out of politics. Whilst the conflict between Julian and Sonia is still a personal and dramatic element within the novel, presented in this fashion it provides a political dimension to the novel's climax: a component that will hopefully resonate during this personal clash.

Although the primary motivation behind the framing of this relationship within political terms was to maintain the prominence of the political within the novel's climax, another advantage offered by this approach was the opportunity afforded Sonia to exercise political agency. In the novel, Sonia provides an important presence: she is a catalyst for Tom's growth as she provides advice and criticism, as well as offering both him and the reader a respite from the political engagement. Yet in earlier drafts, Sonia was much further removed from politics, which was primarily the concern of Julian, Tom and Andrew. Whilst she demonstrated her own involvement in democracy as a member of the electorate by exercising her right to vote and attending her MP's surgeries, she was far more limited in her scope for political action than Julian or even Tom, who spends much of the novel displaying less political awareness than Sonia does. By presenting the personal relationship between Julian and Sonia as a political struggle, Sonia can execute political action and effect the political portion of the novel. In her contest with Julian, she prevails through acts typical of both real and fictional politics, leaking information and relying on representation from her MP. This enables her to remove Julian from his position and strengthen her own relationship with Tom, allowing her to exercise her political agency despite not being a part of the political establishment.

As demonstrated above, whilst the exploration of personal elements within a political novel can be used to offer the reader who may not be thoroughly conversant with politics a component of the narrative which offers accessibility and understanding to the characters, my approach was to attempt to imbue the personal relationships of the novel with a political significance. In doing so, it was my intention that the political element and ideology of the novel would remain central, and that its presence within

the personal interactions and motivations of the novel's characters will cause it to register on readers lacking an interest in or a substantial information base on politics.

To summarise this chapter, in attempting to create a representation of politics within a work of creative prose fiction, I have discovered several challenges presented by the form. Firstly, any ideology that is included as part of this representation threatens imperilling the novel's literary appeal and reducing it to propaganda. Secondly, the presence of political detail has the potential to stall one's narrative or alienate readers without interest or experience in political procedure. Yet both of these elements can offer the political author much: the interaction of ideas and affect within a work of fiction can lead to tense, impassioned prose, whilst the political sphere presents a unique framework with which characters can interact.

As a result, my approach in writing this novel was to combine the political and the personal elements of the story. This was accomplished first by characters addressing political events in a three-dimensional fashion: Julian's relationship with the political is heated enough that the novel's politics almost serve as a character, whilst it is interaction with the politics by which he is surrounded that motivates Tom's personal development. The second form in which I attempted to merge the personal and political within the novel is the introduction of the political within the personal, keeping the politics within the story at a close proximity to the characters so as to ensure that the climax of the novel could retain a political nature. Works dealing with ideology will never be safe from accusations of pamphleteering and risk isolating those with opposing convictions, whilst to explore Westminster's corridors of power through a novel may require one to struggle between offering a faithful representation and sacrificing authenticity for a more stimulating simulacrum. However, the practice of merging the personal and political elements of the fiction can result in an intensity that can be felt despite these obstacles, and it was this force that I sought to create within my own representation of politics.

### CHAPTER THREE

As the previous chapter has explored, there are pitfalls specific to the representation of political action or discussion within a novel resulting from the nature of this subject matter. This chapter will explore the challenges faced by a novelist when attempting to present such political detail through their fiction's narrative voice. In creating a work of political fiction, the novelist is apt to portray or comment upon events, attitudes and concerns of their period, and the manner in which these elements are presented can impact the extent to which they are absorbed within the narrative. Therefore, one of the foremost issues the political novelist must consider is the voice in which they wish to relate events and be aware of the implications this will have for their subject matter. The political novelist must consider whether their chosen voice will disrupt this assimilation by, for example, undermining the ideals it expresses. Additionally, there is the question of the opaque, complex nature of the political establishment, inhabited by many moving parts with political action taking place across various locations. Does the use of a single narrator limit the reader's view of the political scene? This commentary has discussed how political action or events within a novel can be imbued with intensity through the merging of the political subject matter with an emotional element, yet is there a narrative mode through which this can be best accomplished?

To begin the exploration of how narrative voice interacts with the representation of politics, this chapter will commence with an examination of the omniscient third-person narrator in the political novel. This method of narration has proved popular from one of its earliest authors, Disraeli, who used the mode to great effect in presenting the maturation of his political novels' protagonists. His omniscient narrator shares Disraeli's political philosophy, and 'the comprehensive political consciousness of the speaker is the intellectual and moral position toward which the hero of each volume of the trilogy finally develops' (Schwarz 46). This manner of narration provides the reader with an emphatic sense of Coningsby, Egremont and Tancred's development within a political framework, granting this maturation a prominence that would not be achieved without this voice.

This ability of this narrative mode to demonstrate the scope of the political character's maturation in the *bildungsroman* political novel is bound up with the implied authority in the omniscient external voice. There is, moreover, an association

between this apparently-neutral narrative mode and politics. For most, the events of the political world are conveyed through a variety of intermediaries. Direct involvement with government and politics through elections and MPs' surgeries is available, but the majority of political occurrences are relayed through the newspapers, news broadcasts and websites. For the present-day reader of political novels, there is a familiarity to this voice that might well aid in the absorption of political thought and movement into the text.

The non-partisan nature of these voices should not be taken for granted, and a key part of the debate surrounding politics has been which events receive coverage by media outlets and the manner in which they are presented (Snoddy, 'BBC Policy'). However, their treatment of events is presented as an unbiased report by those whose role it is to report politics rather than to themselves be a part of it (Greenslade, 'Study confirms'). The same is true of the omniscient narrator of the political novel, who is not guaranteed to offer a neutral view of the political situation; Disraeli was, after all, putting forth his own political creed through these novels. John Tulloch claims that 'only the genre of news still maintains some pretensions to an objectivity based on the third person point of view', yet through its use in the political novel there remains a sense that the narrator is examining characters and events through a mature and composed lens, removed from the biases of the figures they observe (Tulloch 636). The use of such a measured voice in the portrayal of the political milieu and the beliefs within it, especially when depicting rounded characters in a state of growth, can lead to the inference of a convincing and dependable representation of political movement.

An additional advantage is the omniscient narrator's scope of vision. Rarely are real political events effected by an individual. Indeed, even if they can be considered the protagonist in political fiction, any MP, Cabinet Minister or even Prime Minister cannot aspire to be more than one part in a vast, complicated machine. Politics is a game for many players and comprised of many parts. Kemme, commenting upon the effect of this vision, draws attention to the manner in which a political development is received in Allen Drury's *Advise and Consent* (1959): 'the narrator explicitly presents the effect of this nomination on the minds of all the major and minor political figures in the plot, an effect which permeates and unifies *Advise and Consent*' (Kemme 38). That a week is a long time in politics is due to the rapidity of events. There are, therefore, difficulties inherent in conveying the mass involvement and frantic motion of political crises (those parts of political life that hold the most interest for writers and

readers) without the freedom to depict each part of the event, along with the thoughts and emotions of its participants. As a result, in works attempting to explore the political process in full, rather than maintaining a focus upon individual figures, the use of omniscient narration can be a beneficial choice.

Yet the omniscient narrator is not the only voice present in political novels. Another popular mode of narration in such works is the restricted third-person. An immediate benefit for the political novelist attempting to merge the political substance of their work with the emotion within the novel is the ‘singularity of perspective and the intensely personal relationship that they [the reader] develop with the central character as a result of the limitations of narrative perspective’ (Wyile 116). Maintaining the focus of the novel upon a single character through their role as narrator thus allows the creation of a sympathetic bond between them and the reader, which is of great use in demonstrating the personal impact of the work’s political action. Richard Kelly’s *The Knives* (2016) maintains a close focus upon its politician protagonist, emphasising the strain caused by his position and the political atmosphere, allowing for intimate narrative such as, ‘Privately Blaylock had expected some grim satisfaction, yet to hear it now confirmed was to feel there were worse things than heartbreak’ (375). It is clear that, whilst not well-suited to a sweeping examination of a national or international political process on account of its singular perspective, this narrative mode offers the ability to follow see political thought and ideology form and develop within the individual, presenting a sense of what it means to exist within the political framework the novel portrays.

Compared to the collections of works that use either omniscient or restricted third-person, the use of a first-person narrator in political fiction appears limited and when it is employed, in my view, it rarely achieves its full potential in terms of what it can offer the genre. C. P. Snow’s *Corridors of Power* (1964) utilises a first-person narrator, and in the process creates a dialogue between what Lewis Eliot, Snow’s narrator, sees and his personal feelings on the issues of nuclear disarmament (Waring 2). Yet other political novels that make use of this narrative mode often fail to explore its ability to foster engagement or explore the personal feeling in reaction to the novel’s political movement.

The true force of direct address in a work of political fiction, in fact, is best displayed through the screen. Both television adaptations of Michael Dobbs’ *House of Cards* have their principal figures, Francis Urquhart (Seed, 1990) and Francis

Underwood (Willimon, 2013-present), break the fourth wall and speak to the viewer throughout their series. The device is well suited to the screen version of the fiction, which allows us to see the action play out before us, punctuated by comments or explanations by either Francis. As active participant in the proceedings whilst also detailing the events, Francis is able to foster a parasitic relationship in which he offers us his access and intellect in exchange for our complicity in his schemes, creating in the audience a sense of personal investment whilst ensuring that we do not lose our way in the chaos of Westminster or Capitol Hill (Fritz 140). Yet despite the opportunities the series demonstrates for the first-person narrator of political fiction, there are few novels that attempt the undertaking, and even fewer that demonstrate the full force of the mode as a means of framing politics.

Resulting in part from this lack of first-person political narrators, one of the earliest decisions I made whilst planning *A Northern Exit* was to frame its political action through the voice of Tom. As the previous chapter notes, it was my intention to see the political and the personal substance of the novel brought closely together in an attempt to create a vital representation of politics, and I believed that the first-person mode of address would foster an engagement with the reader through their continued interaction with a single, personable voice. In addition, the restrictions of perspective that a first-person voice would face was a factor in my choice to utilise this mode of narration: in our own lives, even with the scope and reach of journalism and news media, we are offered a limited view into the political situation. Accordingly, rather than present a narrative in which we are able to access all parts of the political institutions, it was my intention that this feeling of an incomplete scrutiny of the political should be reflected within the novel through the experience of its narrator. It is true that Tom is offered slightly more access than many, and occasionally is able to intrude further into the political sphere. Yet in writing this novel, I wish to present a view of politics shared by the majority of readers, demonstrating what I believed to be a developing distance between the public and their representatives. Tom uncovers much information either through secretive revelation on the part of Julian or Uncle Andrew, or through Tom's own action of intruding into a space reserved for political insiders, and in doing so provides the reader with important exposition. One example of this is his discovery that Gateshead intends to abandon North East devolution, initiated by his watching Julian from the other side of Julian's study door, unseen. Tom describes the scene: 'I saw a door that was half-open, and through the door I



could see Julian' (*ANE* 81). In presenting the novel's events through such a lens, it was my hope that it would complement the novel's theme of the gulf between politician and electorate through a specifically realised fictional moment.

This approach was not free from difficulties. One of the key drawbacks in using a single first-person voice to present this political story came as a result of the sudden and unexpected shift of the novel's key political material from a regional to a national emphasis. This took the form of Britain's decision to leave the European Union, and the subsequent abandonment of the proposed North East devolution. In the earlier chapters of the novel, Tom is well placed as narrator to depict the political movement and events within the North East; his main responsibility in those chapters is to shadow Julian, who exists at the heart of the political milieu in the region. His role as Julian's protégé permits him to be present for much of the discussion and debate surrounding devolution, as well as affording him the opportunity to learn and pass onto the reader the social, political and historical context surrounding the proposed scheme. In contrast, following the EU referendum and the collapse of the devolution process, the primary political action of the novel takes place in Westminster, with nothing suitable remaining to fill the void left by the absence of devolution. As a result, Tom is able to comment upon the proceedings, especially when the effects of the decision are apparent in Newcastle, but the use of a single diegetic narrator limited the scope of the novel, restricting its ability to confront and depict the political action proximate to the developing process of Brexit.

This development is not, in retrospect, as damaging as such a disadvantage might have proved. The nature of Brexit, its form still undecided, would have presented its own difficulties in terms of its representation within the novel. Its as-of-yet undefined characteristics mean that attempting to provide solid political details would be challenging, whilst it is at least possible to present the reception to and the immediate effects of the referendum's results. This is, therefore, an advantage in that it allows me to bypass some of the obstacles inherent in containing political detail in the novel as is explained in the previous chapter. The difficulty of depicting current politics in fiction is a subject on which I will expand in the following chapter, but my attempt to write political fiction from a single first-person perspective has made it apparent that great consideration must be paid to the narrator and their proximity to the story. They should be in a position where they can offer a view of the political situation that is both satisfactory in terms of scope and detail. If this is not achieved, the author risks

excluding portions of the political events or action the work seeks to depict. If one is dealing solely with fictional events, or else looking back to those which have already taken place prior to the act of writing, then determining this position becomes a simpler matter as the novelist can establish the most advantageous position in advance.

With the positioning and form of the narration decided upon, my next step was to consider the character whose responsibility it would be to narrate events. In political fiction, such a task is often given to a politician or a figure who will spend the majority of their time inhabiting the political sphere, whether through their vocalisation of what developments play out or by the third-person narrator accessing their thoughts in reactions as they move within the political milieu. Galt's *The Member* (1832) and Disraeli's *Coningsby* (1844) began this convention in both the first and third-person respectively, and it is a choice which has remained a popular feature of political fiction to this day, with Kelly's *The Knives* (2016) maintaining a focus upon a Conservative Home Secretary. This choice offers the advantage of both knowledge and access; we are often given an account by or of those who have the ability to interact with key figures and be present at the pivotal moments of the political narrative. From political fiction's beginnings, an important appeal of the genre has been the opportunity it affords readers to wander through the corridors of power with no restriction. Looking back at the formative years of the genre, Fielding notes that 'these fictions allowed humble readers to gain a vicarious insight into the lifestyles of the rich and famous who just so happened to also rule their lives' (Fielding 30). Although Fielding writes in a time when technological advances have allowed us far more access to the political establishment through such means as social media, the promise of being able to step within the closed rooms of Westminster, Whitehall or Downing Street accompanied by insider knowledge remains a potent persuasion. No clearer indication of this exists than a publisher's promises regarding Bill Clinton's involvement in the recent James Patterson novel, *The President is Missing* (2018), claiming the work 'will be informed by details that only a President can know' (Penguin Random House).

With these considerations of my narrator's proximity to political action in mind, the character of Tom was initially conceived primarily as means through which the rise and fall of Julian could be witnessed, offering a personable and empathetic voice that could serve to inject further poignancy into the politician's tragedy as well as adding humour to the novel's political detail. This was an alternative to Julian vocalising his own story, which I believed would offer difficulty in terms of providing

an explanation of political tradition and practice in the novel; Julian's experience and knowledge would render such instruction unnecessary. I was also wary of relating a narrative from the perspective of a politician who was to engage in corruption: a premise that might be rejected by readers wearied or outraged by real occurrences no matter Julian's attempted justifications (Winnett and Edwards, 'MPs' expenses'). Instead, I wished for a narrator who could act as a spectator, able to provide a perspective on the shifting of political forces whilst simultaneously offering a human portrait of the central political figures through the point of view of an individual whose narration isn't as emotionally dedicated to the motivations that move the novel's key political actors.

In this capacity, Tom provides an honest if naïve account of both the personal and political events of his tenure in Newcastle. I wished for the narration to be provided by a character who lacks the politician's experience of the political sphere and access to all political spaces. As has been stated in the previous chapter, Tom's education and growing political enthusiasm was inspired in part by the development of Disraeli's Coningsby. Like Coningsby, he is a young man initiated into the world of politics, with Julian playing the role of his Sidonia. Unlike Disraeli's political hero, however, he does not drive the narrative with his own political actions, which is the role of Julian. In this way, Tom's position in the novel is similar to that of Lewis Eliot, the first-person narrator of C. P. Snow's *Corridors of Power* (1964), or the unnamed first-person narrator in Robert Harris' political thriller, *The Ghost* (2007). Both narrators are, to different extents, outsiders within the political framework. Eliot is a civil servant, disconnected from party loyalties and in a role of neutrality, spectating the political activity of the Minister Roger Quaife, whose ideological quest for Britain's nuclear disarmament is the focus of the plot. Harris' narrator is a ghost writer, completing the autobiography of a former Prime Minister facing the possibility of prosecution for war crimes during his time in office. Tom's own detachment from this same framework comes from his very recent interaction with politics, in which his stock is only higher than the average voter due to his association with Julian.

Eliot's role as a civil servant, as well as his academic and legal background in the other entries in the *Strangers and Brothers* series, to which he also provides narration, allows him a breadth of political and scientific knowledge. Yet it was my belief that a political novel would benefit from the use of a narrator less conversant with politics than the political characters whose movements they describe, and that the reader might

equally profit from the narrator's political naivety. Specifically, those readers lacking the experience in or familiarity with politics to comprehend the complexities of the politics the novel addresses are informed at the same moment as Tom himself, whose inexperience presents a justification for this exposition. At the same time, those in possession of that knowledge will not be confronted with a departure from the action in order for politics to be made plain. This is a particular difficulty presented by Eliot's narration in *Corridors of Power*, where the role of civil servant precludes him from seeking or requiring clarification on the daily activity of ministers or Commons etiquette, where 'the world of appearance registers only the cypher-like gestures, innocuous events, which the experienced must translate' (Boak, 19). Snow can endeavour to provide explanation and context through Eliot's narration, though this does at times occur to the detriment of the prose, illustrated in a scene in *Corridors of Power* where projected 'ayes' and 'noes' are elaborated upon in terms of what they will mean for a minister (Snow, 381-382). It is clear that when employing a first-person narrator with a wealth of political knowledge, the author is faced with the question of balance in determining how much clarification that narrator can offer, risking either stalling their narrative through explanations or alienating readers whose political knowledge is less extensive than the narrator's, both of which risk weakening the representation of political detail in their novel.

In contrast to this, Harris' narrator admits early in the novel, 'I see my ignorance about politics as an advantage. I cherish my ignorance, quite frankly' (Harris 24). Whilst he is referring to his lack of political knowledge in the context of completing the autobiography, it is similarly beneficial to his representation of politics through his narration. The narrator's cherished ignorance requires him to educate himself and receive education from others, at times having the political climate and the consequences of political action explained to him. An example of this can be seen when Rycart, the former Foreign Secretary, outlines the change in public perception towards the retired Prime Minister's actions and how this would increase the viability of investigation and eventual prosecution (Harris 312-313). As a result of the use of a narrator lacking political knowledge and experience in both *The Ghost* and *A Northern Exit*, the narrators' need to be apprised of relevant political detail ensures that the reader is able to have these concepts explained to them through the narrator's own education.

In addition to this function of providing information to the reader, Tom's own lack of political understanding is a means of providing clarity through the novel's political substance being conveyed in his own voice. Though he accurately reports Julian's speech, when he provides internal narration on the politics by which he is surrounded it is with a straightforward informality intended to portray matters in a simple though accurate manner. This offers Tom the chance to comment upon what he is told, his observations allowing the revelation of truths that the original speakers had not disclosed. This occurs in Tom's commentary following a speech by Julian on the then-upcoming devolution scheme. The young narrator notes, 'He'd not said it out loud, but you could tell what he'd been thinking as he'd been speaking: as far as he was concerned, there was only one person who'd be able to do the job and do it properly, and that person was Julian Ashworth' (ANE 64). This is a benefit of such political inexperience in a first-person narrator, which has even been utilised in the form of children's voices conveying political information to unfamiliar readers. NoViolet Bulawayo employs such a narrator in her 2013 novel, *We Need New Names*, in which 'the use of an unsophisticated register and a non-theoretical perspective cuts to the quick of complex issues which are articulated in simplified terms' (Wilkinson 125). Though not quite a child, Tom is still a means through which the political consequences and formalities of the world are made apparent, and one whose less-experienced grasp of political matters causes him to translate these into simpler terms, preventing the representation of politics within the novel to become unnecessarily frustrated by overly technical or complex terminology.

Related to his identity as a political outsider and the benefits that this offers the political novel, Tom's identity as a Southerner is advantageous when positioning a novel within the North East. In the early stages of the novel, the story was to be entirely about the political future of the region, and the final version is still strongly concerned with this subject as well as the political and architectural history of Newcastle. Whilst one can reasonably consider that many Newcastle locals would be familiar with the city's past and its current appearance, in attempting to make this novel accessible to as wide an audience as possible, it was important that these details be made clear. Tom is able to explore Newcastle with a sense of adventure and discovery, taking note of each design quirk in his first visit as he is struck with the full force of its appearance. It is in complete surprise that he tells the reader, 'the skyline of Newcastle was schizophrenic. Victorian towers and churches jostled with tower blocks of Brutalism,

here and there interspersed with the glare of the sun catching on the metal and glass of modern offices' (ANE 38). In a similar fashion to his positioning relative to the novel's politics, his lack of knowledge regarding Newcastle's history offered the opportunity for these specifics to be made apparent without an explanation or description that seemed to lack justification.

Another element of Tom's identity is his socioeconomic status, which was determined because of a primary concern in the early stages of the novel. It was important that Tom had the ability to be present at important political moments despite his relative innocence of the political sphere as has already been discussed. Politician narrators, by the very nature of their role, are usually able to be on hand for any major developments wherever they might become apparent, yet Tom's identity as a political outsider presented a challenge. Whilst his association with Julian provides him with sufficient access, I was conscious of the requirement for Tom to be able to be present at the events and discussions surrounding these developments, unrestricted by such responsibilities as employment and, vitally, able to journey to the North East in the first place. One criticism of Lewis Eliot as a first-person narrator across the *Strangers and Brothers* series has been that 'Eliot is privy to so much information in so many locations' as a means to supply the reader with the details required to form the full picture of the novels' main concerns (Mothe 103). My solution to this problem was Tom's privileged and wealthy background, by which he is able to accompany Julian at whatever time is necessary. As his main function in Newcastle is to learn about politics from Julian without the need to support himself financially through other employment, Tom is constantly available, providing us with a view of the political milieu whenever it might be required, free from responsibilities that might otherwise divert his attention whilst his access to Julian permits him entry into political conversations.

Although Tom's identity as an outsider in terms of politics, geography and social class offer the advantages detailed above, my choice of narrator also presented challenges to my attempt to represent politics within *A Northern Exit*. The most obvious of these was due to Tom's social class and privilege. Though the ease with which Tom is able to follow the novel's politics to Newcastle and spend the majority of his time keeping track of its movements is an undeniable advantage of this decision, the choice was not without difficulties. For instance, much of the novel is concerned with the need for funding and investment in the North East owing to its original focus

on the proposed devolution scheme and, following the loss of devolution, later drafts concentrated upon the two major developments of the EU referendum result and the election of Donald Trump. A huge factor in all of these events was the sense that those voting had been let down by politicians, finding themselves in a situation where the status quo seemed untenable. Though Tom is able to identify this, and does so in the novel, his social class makes attempts to articulate these thoughts through a narrator who cannot possibly empathise problematic. Tom has never been in financial difficulty, hungry, or at risk of losing his home. Even should the worst happen politically, Tom himself acknowledges that his family and those like them would feel the effects the least, stating, 'If the economy took a hit, then I could be sure that my family and I would remain secure. If we couldn't find anyone to trade with, we'd be among some of the last to starve' (ANE 146). Despite this sardonic admission, there is still a disconnection between Tom and the people whose situation he attempts to describe.

This separation between Tom and those whose political and social circumstances he depicts had the potential to cause the reader to view him unsympathetically. Reminiscent of politicians making statements regarding social welfare whilst living extremely comfortable lifestyles, Tom's description of a political situation which is unlikely to touch him in any meaningful way, or his discussion of the consequences of Brexit whilst eating at a restaurant or enjoying cocktails without ever needing to worry about money, seems at the very least hypocritical (Lurie, 'Why It Matters'). The reader might even take this perceived hypocrisy as a feature of the authorial voice, thus calling into question the novel's ability to address the politics it depicts and so reject its representation entirely. Why should the reader put their faith in a novel claiming to explore the gulf between politicians and the electorate when the narrator seems incapable of breaching this same chasm? Left unattended, this had the potential to undermine the credibility of the novel's political engagement severely.

My approach to avoiding this eventuality was the use of the *bildungsroman* form in portraying Tom's development. This shift, as has been mentioned in Chapter Two, was partially prompted by the EU referendum and the slow death of North East devolution, yet whilst this presented a void within the text that needed to be filled, the narrative of Tom's maturation during the novel's events was primarily the result of the aforementioned problem. It was my intention that, through the introduction of the *bildungsroman* narrative, the issue of Tom's social naivety could be addressed and, as

a consequence, it would be possible to avoid the alienation of the reader through his apparent ignorance. The *bildungsroman* is used to great effect in many of the novels that first established political fiction as a genre, such as *Coningsby* and *Phineas Finn*, the earnest young protagonists of which inspired Tom. Coningsby, in particular, is the focus of a novel in which ‘the whole course of the volume is a means of showing us the process of his education’ (Spear 74). In more recent works of political fiction, this figure has become less prominent than other recognisable models, such as the cynical, manipulative figures of Dobbs’ *House of Cards* trilogy or Mullins’ or Kelly’s idealistic yet flawed old parliamentarians, although Snow’s *Strangers and Brothers* series does form, in its entirety, a tale of the development of Lewis Eliot, its narrator.

Tom displays such a form of maturation throughout the novel, gaining both political understanding and an increased awareness of his own privilege, prompted by witnessing political events, his time with Julian and his relationship with Sonia. In particular, it is Sonia who does the most to make Tom aware of his enviable and secure position, asking him in the early stages of their acquaintance, ‘Your family’s very wealthy, aren’t they?’ (ANE 49) and reminding him of his status as one of ‘the idle rich’ (ANE 91). As a result, Tom shows growing consciousness of the limitations of his own understanding and his good fortune, though it is a gradual process. Following the decision to leave the European Union, he finds himself looking at his television, ‘wanting to turn it on and find some footage of crying children or shell-shocked refugees’ (ANE 146). Whilst he is considering others, the garish, over-the-top nature of the image demonstrates his lack of experience with want or need. It is only some time later that he can appreciate his own naivety, and he does so by drawing a direct comparison between himself and the politicians who had demonstrated how little they were able to understand their own electorate, acknowledging his own privilege and shortcomings by placing them alongside theirs. Tom states, ‘Like Cameron, Osborne and May, I’d assumed that I’d known how the majority of the nation thought and had felt secure in the knowledge that the status quo would continue’ (ANE 145) before summing up the problem in a simple sentence: ‘What had I ever really known about the majority?’ (ANE 145).

In drawing a definitive link between his privilege and his inability to consider the experiences of those who voted to leave the EU, it was my intention to give Tom’s circumstances a political and social significance in relation to the novel’s events. The freedom of movement and political access that he enjoys is advantageous in



positioning him throughout the novel, yet to use Tom's social position and its privileges as a means for him to observe without addressing it in terms of its political implications would be problematic in a novel that addresses class division and politics as a closed institution. Even at the conception of the political novel genre, the ability of protagonists to travel to locations such as Manchester, Lancashire and Marney in Disraeli's *Coningsby* and *Sybil* served as an element of the author's political manifesto: that the nobility should regain its rights and fulfil its duties to the nation and its people (Speare 57). Although *A Northern Exit* addresses its own political concerns and contains different themes, in attempting to bind Tom's social and economic circumstances to the questions and disputes present in the novel in a similar fashion, it was my hope that this element would become a part of the political discussion rather than undermining the authenticity of the representation.

Whilst Tom's development is a driving force behind his split with Julian, whose preoccupation with his growing detachment from politics is explored more fully in Chapter Two, a contrast is also formed between Tom and his family. Once again within the lavish setting so familiar with him at the novel's opening, Tom views his relatives' uncomplicated disapproval of Brexit and wonders, 'Would I be feeling the same way if I'd not gone to Newcastle? Probably. Would I be any happier, being able to take comfort in the absolute knowledge that I was on the right side of history?' (ANE 184). The development that the reader is shown here continues to the end of the novel, when Tom has separated from Julian and is taking part in politics not as the spectator protected by the detachment and economic protection that the role invites, but as an active participant in the political process. His attendance at a rally in support of the Labour Party and his role in the campaign ahead of the upcoming election form a suitable ending to this stage of his political education and growth.

Through this method of positioning Tom's privileged lifestyle as the opening stages of his maturation throughout the novel, it is my intention that the distance between my narrator and the social realities to which he must be the spectator decrease as he progresses through his *bildungsroman*. In combining this with an exploration of the political significance of this economic comfort and security, my aim was to retain the ease of movement and access Tom enjoys whilst limiting the risk of his narration being rejected by the reader. As has already been stated, the form of the novel shifted over several drafts so that it is not now solely a case of regional politics being explored, but of Tom's coming of age within a framework and against a backdrop of national and

global political motion. Whilst his social naivety within the novel's opening chapters still has the potential to irritate, Sonia and Julian's commentary during Tom's development is meant to provide some separation between the authorial voice and Tom's narration within the earlier chapters. This is aimed to ensure that the reader does not take Tom's first, naïve outlook as one that the author seeks to inhabit or promote, and in so doing reject the representation of politics that Tom describes.

Following this determination of Tom's proximity to political power and his identity, the final step in the creation of *A Northern Exit*'s narrator was to determine the tone in which Tom would reveal political details and describe events to the reader. This is another area in which the first-person mode of narration offers a distinct advantage. Specifically, its more personal style allows it to play host to a range of moods and characteristics, certain of which might complement or strengthen the narrative and thus the novel's intended ideas. The use of a narrative style that emulates a face-to-face conversation often means that 'the audience can develop an illusion of direct involvement in the communicative process', and it is this sense of involvement and engagement that I wished to foster throughout the novel (Lissa 58). Such a means of engaging the reader with the narrator has been used through political fiction before; Robert Penn Warren's use of a first-person narrator, Jack Burden, in *All the King's Men* (1946) 'promotes a desirable narrator-reader intimacy' that invites the reader's investment in Burden's development (Milne 161). In terms of *A Northern Exit*, the personal feeling that I intended to permeate the political, particularly in the case of Tom's politics-spurred maturation, would be far more keenly felt if the reader was able to develop some attachment to their narrator as he related events both personal and political.

The most notable aspect of Tom's tone is the ironical humour with which he describes his surroundings, the people with which he interacts and the occurrences to which he bears witness. His humour is light-hearted, irreverent and at times self-deprecating, at one point declaring Newcastle's best economic solution to be 'splitting off from Britain and raiding it for resources like Vikings' (ANE 225) and commenting about an MP, 'A very cynical and most definitely Southern part of my mind was surprised that Ken Johnson knew a word like "protégé"' (ANE 78). This ironical treatment of the novel's events is primarily intended to offer the reader a feeling of amusement whilst reading the text. I have spoken earlier in this commentary about the risk of the novel's political detail disrupting the flow of the narrative. Though I later

elected to attend to this through merging its exploration of its political subject and the use of affect, my original attempt to mitigate this disturbance of the text was realised through Tom's manner of framing such topics. His satirical take on the political action is meant to offer regular refreshing breaks from the close examination of the novel's political substance. This can be observed when Tom's description of a meeting regarding awareness of devolution is punctuated by his wry comment of, 'If they wanted people to pay attention and get behind them, they should have simply proclaimed Julian King of the North and had him sack Watford Gap service station. Posters and adverts in the local paper lacked a certain flair' (ANE 57). Through such comic exaggeration or sarcastic commentary, it is my hope that the reader is persuaded engage with Tom as a lively narrator and that the details which he imparts, lightened and made more distinctive by his humorous delivery, might be retained more effectively. Tom's manner of address is intended both to provide an amusing description of the political activity in *A Northern Exit* whilst fostering greater engagement with a realistic, personal voice.

Yet it is the nature of politics and political fiction that care must be taken when one considers one's mode of expression, and the political novelist should be aware of the risks they invite by adding an ironical or humorous tone to the exploration of the political milieu. One of these hazards is the humour's potential to undermine the serious political commentary in the novel. Tom's voice is such that he is given to a flippant comment about almost everything with which he is confronted, yet in doing so he possessed the capability to trivialise some of the political or social elements which the narrative required be taken seriously. A good example of this occurs when Julian is giving Tom a tour of Newcastle and showing him locations such as the Riverside Dene or the Byker Wall. Tom considers the apartment blocks that Julian has brought him there to see and inwardly states, 'They were flats: just blocks of flats. It wasn't like you could write poetry about them. Well, you probably could, but you shouldn't' (ANE 62). Shortly following this comment, Tom is given a lesson about the structures' significance and their place in T. Dan Smith's time as City Council Leader, and he later thinks more seriously about the dwellings, referring to them as 'An unfortunate option for those for whom houses weren't a possibility: to be stowed away in boxes, more like possessions than people' (ANE 64). Without this reflection, Tom's narration comes across as dismissive when addressing a subject that the novel itself takes seriously: that people's needs are being overlooked by politicians. In the context

of *A Northern Exit*, this disconnect between the themes of the novel and what might be perceived by the reader as a dissenting narrative voice has the potential to bring about a rejection of the work's representation of politics.

Additionally, the satirical note also has the potential to be viewed as an attack on dissenting beliefs and ideologies. Tom's irreverent narration, though intended to inject the novel with a greater sense of energy than might be accomplished through a neutral, third-person account, has to be viewed as a feature of the voice that guides the reader through the political landscape of the novel. As a result, the reader must place a considerable amount of reliance on that voice, particularly the expectation that Tom will not distort events and misrepresent the validity of political positions, particularly in the case of contentious developments such as the EU referendum. Tom gets many opportunities to do so, though none appears as tempting or precarious in this regard as Julian's final argument with Ken Johnson. Tom demonstrates his fondness for casually insulting the MP for Newcastle East several times throughout the novel, yet this encounter is far more politically charged than any they have had previously. Johnson has appeared to warn Julian to drop his controversial housing scheme, and from that starting point the conversation rapidly becomes an argument over Brexit that Tom is almost certain is on the verge of turning violent. Yet in this scene, where Ken Johnson is the most explicit in his political beliefs, Tom makes the comment, 'Ken Johnson gave him the sort of look that people usually gave Ken Johnson' (ANE 209). It is not an attack on Johnson's position; Tom in fact comes out of that confrontation considering that the MP's stance is more defensible than Julian's, partially prompting the gradual separation between himself and Julian. Nevertheless, Tom's poking fun at Johnson in this scene may still potentially be viewed as an attempt to discredit the political positions the man himself espouses, thus creating an element of partisanship in the novel despite this not being my intention. Consequently, such an appearance of bias might result in a rejection of the portrayal of politics realised in *A Northern Exit*. In a similar fashion to his comments made about the apartments in Riverside Dene, discussed above, Tom makes his feelings clear shortly afterwards, this time by reflecting critically on Julian's inability to see any merit in what Johnson had told him, the implication being that Tom has done so.

My solution to this issue is to try to ensure that, similar to the issue of Tom's social class, this element of humour is incorporated into the ideas the novel espouses. This is to say that rather than relying on the humour to provide only diversion and energy

in politics-heavy scenes, my goal is for the humour to support the political message of the novel and to be used in such a manner that its point is strengthened through Tom's comments. There is not an abundance of comedic political novels, so to witness the abilities of the union of humour and politics one must turn to political television series, in which the majority of satirical treatments of Parliament take place. The humour of both *Yes Minister* (Jay and Lynn, 1980-1984) and *The Thick of It* (Iannucci, 2005-2012) drives their political arguments home. Sir Humphrey's protracted speeches elegantly illustrate the frustrating and progress-defying nature of the parliamentary system, whilst underneath the amusingly futile antics of *The Thick of It's* governmental figures 'lurks the serious accusation that politicians make up policies off the cuff and that they are more concerned about the name sounding right than benefitting society' (Basu 91).

In a similar fashion, rather than use the comedic tone of Tom's voice to mock the opposition or their politics, I instead resolved to transform the mood of the jokes and comments that Tom makes over the course of the novel. For much of the narrative, Tom's quips and jibes are light-hearted and lack any force behind them, and this tone is a suitable counterpoint to Tom's position in terms of his development over the course of the novel. Comfortable and unburdened with much political or social consciousness, Tom has no stake in what is taking place and lacks much of the understanding necessary for his comments to have great political significance. However, following the EU referendum, and even more noticeably following the election of Donald Trump, the mood of Tom's jokes becomes darker and despondent. As he tries to come to terms with the election result, his mind almost seems to throw out remarks steeped in biting sarcasm about the Trump administration, stating, 'Anyone standing on the grassy knoll had best keep the gun fully loaded' (ANE 231) and, later that day, 'Plenty of people were afraid that this was our first decisive step towards the end of the world. This was in a small way comforting, because it meant that I wasn't some mad paranoiac' (ANE 239).

The purpose of this more vulnerable, bitter humour is both to avoid trivialising serious political issue through the inclusion of carefree satire on the part of Tom, whilst imbuing his narration in the latter portion of the novel with an emotional depth not often felt in the first. Not only does this add weight to the conclusion of his development within the novel, it also allows Tom's humour to be another means through which emotion is able to enter the novel and merge with the political

substance, as has been discussed in the previous chapter. Consequently, as Tom becomes more politically conscious, it is not only his understanding of the political and social realities around him that transform, but the manner in which he responds to and shapes them in his own internal narrative. His cheerfulness does not vanish, but he is less prone to blithe observations on the state of the political scene. His humour reflects the distressed, at times despairing feeling experienced by many following the political events of 2016, whilst at the same time demonstrating his own growth. As a result of this, Tom's more light-hearted comments, when seen in the context of his maturation, pose less threat to the representation of politics within the novel, which is further strengthened by the response it provokes from Tom's narrative tone.

In summary, my experience in producing a political novel that uses a first-person narrator has brought me to several conclusions. The first is that a third-person, omniscient voice diminishes many of the hazards that the political writer faces. The authority implied by the detached voice allows for the effective portrayal of a character's growth within a political environment, whilst a narration told from the perspectives of multiple characters is more capable of surveying the milieu and benefit from different points of focalisation across the political sphere, allowing for a comprehensive and sophisticated representation of political action. Conversely, should the political novelist use the first-person mode of narration, they may find that this mode has a greater capacity to depict the psychological and personal impact of political action, or allows for a more vivid portrayal of the politics through a voice belonging to a particular social class, region or political ideology. However, there are elements that must be considered so that the novel's political substance is not misrepresented, obscured or undermined.

In using a single narrator, the author must consider carefully the qualities possessed by this figure. First, the narrator should be eminently placed to both provide an overview of the political events taking place, whilst at the same time able to make available to the reader a satisfactory level of detail and interaction with some of the events' major figures. Second, their history, economic and social position should also be determined in view of their place within narrative and political context, diminishing the risk of this characteristic undermining their narrative. Finally, the political author must take care that the inclusion of humour or emotion do not weaken what points the novel seeks to make about politics by undercutting its own claims or offering an inauthentic representation of dissenting points of view. In using the narrative voice as

a personal element that absorbs the political subject matter, the politics depicted should maintain their authenticity and significance.

## CHAPTER FOUR

In the previous two chapters, this commentary has explored the challenges posed to the representation of politics in creative prose fiction by the political subject matter and the choice of narrator. This chapter is dedicated to exploring the difficulties presented by the setting of the political story and the solutions I employ in *A Northern Exit*.

In any genre of fiction, the description of various locations in which the story takes place can be an important element, and there are many novels that foreground vibrant depictions of settings and scenery. When one comes to write a political novel, however, there is more to consider. The setting is an important element: a specific background against which the politics is played out, which characterises the political action it fosters, and which can interact with the politics in a manner specific to its personality and history. A strong sense of location can strengthen the representation of politics in particular ways. For instance, in his 1966 study of the American political novel, Milne praises the accomplished creation of setting in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*. As Milne notes: 'we see the "vitriolic, arsenical green of cotton rows" and the "violent, metallic, throbbing blue of the sky" and are immediately caught up in the Louisiana back-country atmosphere' (Milne 163). By the same token, political novels that do not impress their setting upon readers sufficiently can weaken the overall force of the politics on display. Discussing David Graham Phillips' political fiction, Milne comments that these works are flawed by 'an absence of "settings"', the reader not being permitted to gain a sense of 'the Middle Western town from which the Phillips heroes spring, nor the Washington environment to which they transplant themselves' (Milne 101). It is in the political author's interests, should they wish to display the full weight of their novel's politics, to create this sense of setting.

Almost any location, whether an entire nation or a small village, can have its own social, economic and political significance that, ideally, would inform the political motion within the novel. The location forms a key role of the milieu, which should here be taken to mean the physical environment and social setting in which the novel's events take place. Thus, the selection of the country or region immediately has an effect upon the political events which are to be told, framing them from that geographical perspective with all of the significance such a viewpoint would offer.



Indeed, the choice of location for a political novel is in itself a political choice. If one places their story within a Labour stronghold, for example, it is likely that the tale will involve a treatment of the beliefs and ideologies most commonly held there, regardless how these stances are treated within the novel, or from what perspective they are viewed, whether this belongs to a member of that community or, as is the case in *A Northern Exit*, from an outsider.

The recognisable political institutions of a nation can be of great use to the novelist in the depiction of a setting that can house and interact with the political action contained within their narrative. Many examples of political fiction make use of recurrent venues and institutions: Parliament is a popular and repeated locale within British political fiction, a role it has held since the 1850s, at which time ‘Whitehall and Westminster established themselves as part of the landscape of British domestic fiction’ (Harvie 55). The rationale for their importance and inclusion is clear. First, the Houses of Parliament are the nucleus of British democracy and governance, the decisions that steer the nation made within its chambers; they are such key institutions that the portrayal of politics within Britain would typically demand their presence in order to satisfactorily demonstrate the exercise of democratic power. Second, the repeated use of these settings within fiction does more than simply provide ‘a political background which might just as well have been mercantile or medical’ (Blotner, *Political Novel*, 8). Including these traditional political settings, in a similar fashion to the use of real politicians or their recognisable fictional counterparts, fosters a sense of authenticity within the novel. Furthermore, their presence is a useful shorthand for the novelist seeking to portray British politics. It can be expected that those reading the fiction have some familiarity with the politics that are described and that some of the customs and traditions of the Commons will be familiar to them. This would have been the case for Disraeli’s intended audience – primarily his fellow parliamentarians – and as the genre of political fiction has matured and its readership has widened, the transparency of and access to daily political processes have both increased. As a result, the inclusion of these settings is a means by which these protocols and traditions can be implied without the repeated need for lengthy description, allowing the author to embellish this basic indicated information with their own more specialised political knowledge and *savoir faire* to bring the setting to life.

Finally, in the period in which political fiction began, the use of the Palace of Westminster and other recognisable political institutions within the novel allowed the

reader ‘access to a lofty, desirable world, in a period in which journalists cast a respectful veil across the “inside life of politics”’ (Speare 30). Nowadays, access to these institutions is far more available, through live footage of Parliament, the Parliamentary lobby and the ability of representatives to directly address the public through social media; one can even take virtual tours of Parliament via the internet. However, a key appeal of political fiction remains the insider view it can offer its readers, with Jeffrey Archer’s *First Among Equals* (1984) marketed as being written ‘from the inside’ (Harvie 55), and other novels of the period, written by ministers, MPs and civil servants, offering the reader ‘an authentic view of politics’. What Harvie refers to as ‘one unliterary quality: the demand for an “authentic record” of something hermetic and specialized’ has been a major element in the political novel’s attractiveness, and a part of this is the depiction of Snow’s ‘Corridors of Power’ (Harvie 55).

However, this is not meant to establish that all political fiction needs to place its story directly within the Houses of Parliament or other locations in Westminster. The British political system is arranged in such a way that it is possible to place political narratives in any of its constituencies although, as I have found to be the case in writing *A Northern Exit*, it is difficult to entirely exclude the national political institutions from a political novel in favour of local government. Uncle Andrew, for example, remains a representative of national political activity, and the latter half of the novel is dominated by concerns effecting the whole of the United Kingdom. Yet MPs are expected to return to their constituencies for surgeries and hustings, and election scenes have been a keystone for many political novels since the inception of the genre; they are, after all, the point at which the citizens of the nation are able to interact most directly with the diplomatic process, presenting its readers with a political scenario more familiar to them than any other. It is, however, worth reflecting upon the disparity between voter turnouts in national and local elections, reinforcing the sense of the apparent pre-eminence of national politics and what consequences this has for the political novel in terms of its setting (Wainwright, ‘Council elections’).

Alternatively, the political novelist does have the option of placing their novel within an imagined location, the history and political disposition of which is created entirely according to their own whims. There are several of works dealing with fictional constituencies, such as the district of Eatanswill created in Dickens’ *The Pickwick Papers* (1836), which still existed as a constituency in the 2006 political

drama, *The Amazing Mrs Pritchard*. Trollope had his Loughshane; Galt had the constituency of Frailtown. Yet even these and other imagined boroughs are, to varying extents, based on existing locations. *The Pickwick Papers*' Eatanswill was inspired by an election Dickens witnessed in Northamptonshire North; Galt's Frailtown was arguably based on Higham Ferrers (Gordon ix). Should one base an imaginary location on a real area, then there is still the expectation that the novelist should take into account the political and historical details of the region that has been used as inspiration, whether the key events of the novel are related to factual political specifics or they are themselves entirely fictional.

Yet whatever the chosen location, whether it is the centre of national politics or regional, whether a real or imagined community, it is important that the setting should have some significance for the political events of the novel. Political fiction is as much about the effect of political action as it is the exercise of political power and, like the politician seeking to represent a community, the novelist must be well-versed in the needs and the history of that area. Similarly, should the author neglect to consider the relationship between the political activity within their novel and their setting, this can lead to a sense of inauthenticity in their writing that can have a detrimental effect on the realism of the fiction and the depiction of politics. Even if the events detailed in the novel are unlikely within the political framework that the novel represents, such deviances from reality might be excused if the incorrect or exaggerated details are concerned with the minutiae of parliamentary procedure, which would reveal themselves most clearly to those working within this system or with a keen interest in it. On the other hand, if one was to read the story of a Conservative MP representing a North East district even thirty years after the miners' strike, the premise would immediately ring false to anyone familiar to the region's history. Even if such basic oversight is avoided, the author of a political novel would do well to bear in mind the political concerns and beliefs of the region or area their work encapsulates, the omission or distortion of which may well undermine the broader portrayal of political activity and thought within the work.

With these concerns in mind, this chapter will reflect upon the methods I employed whilst crafting the settings of *A Northern Exit*, and the resources and practices that were of use in creating an authentic location in which the political action could take place. It will first examine the choice of the novel's setting and how its depiction relates to the political content of the narrative, then explore how the inclusion of the

region's history, such as the use of the political figure T. Dan Smith and the architecture of Newcastle upon Tyne, was used to imbue the description of the area with a feeling of authenticity. Following this, the chapter will reflect upon the use of various sources available to me in creating the setting and the reaction to national politics within it, including newspaper articles, news footage and my own experience and perspective on these events from my position within the North East during the period in which the novel takes place.

In writing *A Northern Exit*, it was my decision that the novel be set primarily within Newcastle and Gateshead, far from any recognisable centres of political power in Britain, though as I have already stated, Parliament and national political concerns both feature within the work. This is primarily due to the novel's intended focus on devolution, a political process far more significant to the North East than London. The proposed purpose of North East devolution was the transference of various powers from centralised government to the North East Combined Authority (made up of the local authorities of Durham, Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside, South Tyneside, Northumberland and Sunderland). The deal would include nine hundred million pounds over thirty years for the creation of an investment fund, which could be used for the reform of public services, including health and social care (Kelly, 'North East devolution'). Although the scheme received a positive reaction from the North East, the prerequisite of an elected Mayor of the North East was an unpopular condition (Wearmouth, 'North East devolution'). This stipulation was one of the major factors in the decision to place Julian and Tom within the North East. The mayoral elections, as well as being a political event taking place outside of Westminster, would attract experienced political figures. This was the case of Andy Burnham serving as Mayor of Greater Manchester; like Julian, Burnham transferred from the Labour Shadow Cabinet to take part in the mayoral election in May 2017.

The choice of setting was also a result of the novel's theme of the distance growing between the political establishment and the electorate, represented ably by the distance between London and the North East. Yet in setting the novel in the North East, I was unable to rely upon established locations to grant the novel a sense of familiarity and authenticity, or to provide a context to the political storyline to readers outside of the region.

What first needed to be accomplished was a vivid description of the novel's central location: Newcastle upon Tyne. The political content of the novel is tied to its setting

in Newcastle; the approach to devolution, the EU referendum and the election of Donald Trump are viewed as taking place within or experienced from the perspective of the North East, a quality that developed from the work's beginnings as a depiction and exploration of local government. Similar to the relationship between the political and the personal explored in Chapter Two, my novel seeks to form a connection between its politics and its setting. This practice has appeared since the early stages of political fiction, notably in *Felix Holt* (1866), in which Eliot's landscape is 'symbolic of England as a whole' (Harvie 59). Once we have read the work's vibrant description of its fictional setting of Loamshire, according to Harvie, 'we don't just have a description, but a pretty good idea what this chapter, even the book itself, is going to be about', namely the importance of land to the politics of that age (Harvie 58). In a similar manner to Eliot's depiction of Loamshire, the description of Newcastle is intended to highlight the political and social condition in a manner that connects the setting and the novel's representations of politics.

In the case of *A Northern Exit*, one of the key political themes is the need for investment in the North East. This is underlined clearly when Julian takes Tom to several parts of Newcastle outside the city centre, showing the areas in need of the most funding and exclaiming at one point, 'if devolution is going to benefit the North East, then it's got to build up places like this until they can start building themselves up' (ANE 67). Vivid descriptions of 'streets full of litter, graffiti scrawled across the boarded-up windows of shops and restaurants' (ANE 61) are intended to prove the need for devolution and the development its funding could bring with greater clarity than could be offered through conversation with Julian or by documents made available to Tom. It is my intention that the depictions of the city provide a visual reinforcement of the importance of devolution to the region and the impact of the loss of funding from the EU, making clear to the reader what is at stake in the region prior to the referendum.

Another manner in which the appearance of the setting has political significance within the novel is as a symbolic representation of the fractured political opinion within the region. The political connotations of location are an effective tool for the skilled political novelist, as the perpetual heat of Robert Penn Warren's South 'causes people to drip and their passions to rise, at political rallies, hotel-room conclaves, or legislative sessions' (Milne 163). I attempted to accomplish something similar in *A Northern Exit* through Tom's initial description of Newcastle on his first exploration

of the city centre. Tom's narration of this scene is graphic and flamboyant, calling the skyline of Newcastle 'schizophrenic' and describing how 'Victorian towers and churches jostled with tower blocks of Brutalism, here and there interspersed with the glare of the sun catching on the metal and glass of modern offices' (ANE 38). This jumble of buildings from different eras and in contrasting styles is intended to display the successive layers of Newcastle's history as well as represent both the mix of beliefs and the approaching political debate and division which is approaching: a signal for the reader who is aware of the imminent referendum and its subsequent fallout. In this manner, it was my aim in presenting the appearance of the city in a striking fashion to provide some foreground and indication of the intensity of the political dispute in the region, creating a more authentic depiction of politics within the novel.

It is also my intention that the novel not only offer a depiction of present-day Newcastle, but that it should similarly explore the political and social background of the region and its relationship to the politics which form the focus of *A Northern Exit*. Politics, particularly British politics, owes a great deal to precedent, tradition and history, and therefore it is fitting that political fiction should portray the connection between the political action of the novel and the broader political context in which it exists. Several works of political fiction use such a device: Richard T. Kelly's *Crusaders* (2008) offers an epic-style survey of the social and historical state of the North East, whilst Esler's *A Scandalous Man* (2008) splits its narrative between the present and political diaries written in the 1980s, demonstrating the continuity of politics over the decades. Newcastle's political history can offer a context for *A Northern Exit*'s events and the manner in which they are received in the North East. Without an awareness of the circumstances that contributed to these developments, a great deal of the force surrounding these political events portrayed within the fiction is lost.

The key element in reconstructing the past of Newcastle in *A Northern Exit* is one of its more infamous figures: T. Dan Smith. Smith is fundamental in linking Newcastle's present to its past within the novel. His tenure as a political presence within Newcastle is still debated to this day; his revolutionary transformation of the city stands at odds with the allegations of corruption leading to a jail sentence. More appropriately, it is due in a large part to T. Dan Smith that Newcastle has its chaotic appearance that is linked to the novel's political subject matter. Smith first appears in a chapter which offers an opportunity to explore Newcastle, and Julian draws a link

between himself and his predecessor, telling Tom, ‘Whoever becomes the Mayor of the North East is going to have the same sort of power that Smith had, except this time it’ll be official’ (ANE 64). Through Julian’s lecture and Tom’s research, the reader is introduced to the disputed nature of T. Dan Smith’s reputation in the North East: his impressive accomplishments, the prominence and political recognition he managed to gain and the shameful end to his legacy. This is made clear through discussion and investigation of Smith, with quotes such as:

Whatever else they said about Smith, and the phrase ‘guilty of corruption’ had a certain compelling element, you couldn’t say he hadn’t been motivated. It seemed like there’d not been a project happening during his years at the helm of Newcastle that he’d not thrown himself at whole-heartedly, and it wasn’t like there’d been a dearth of them. Whatever could be done, he’d seemingly given his all to ensure that it would be (ANE 147).

My decision to incorporate Smith’s part in Newcastle’s history and physical appearance into my narrative was made at the outset of this project. When the novel had been intended to cover Julian’s tenure as Mayor of the North East, he was intended to be Smith’s modern counterpart. The two have much in common: their dynamism, their vision for Newcastle and concern with housing and, in the original plan for the novel, the nature of their downfall. Devolution is a major example of these similarities, with Tom’s discovery of the passage, ‘*TDS as the “Voice of the North” urged passionately that power should be devolved from central government to directly-elected provincial (regional) authorities in England*’ (ANE 70) linking both men through this ambition. Tom takes note of this and other comparisons, commenting, ‘The similarities had only seemed sharper when I read through a chapter on Smith’s own struggle with Newcastle housing’ (ANE 215). Through Julian’s preoccupation with his predecessor and Tom’s research, T. Dan Smith is an unspoken presence within the city and in local government. He haunts Julian through bitter reminders of how his own time as ‘Mr Newcastle’ had ended, as well as more physically through the contemporary landscape of Newcastle itself. Tom comes to associate the architecture of the city increasingly with Smith, at one stage commenting, ‘every brutalist structure might as well have had T. Dan Smith sitting on it, enjoying the show’ (ANE 141).

Following the alterations to the novel as a result of the EU referendum, I attempted to maintain Smith as a presence within the text. The comparisons between the end of his career and Julian’s own conclusion are weaker in the current version of *A Northern*

*Exit*, though there are still similarities between the two Leaders of Newcastle City Council. Julian's situation echoes Smith's own following the loss of devolution, as both politicians 'take on a regional role he believed was essential for the well-being both of the North and the country as a whole, only to find he had no power to influence events' (ANE 214).

By exploring the political history of Newcastle in the novel, it is my aim to portray the links between Newcastle's past and its present through these forms of interaction whilst including a representation of the city's own distinct identity and background. Newcastle upon Tyne is meant to exist in the novel as an authentic setting with its own history and atmosphere that communicates with the present political action and ideas. This quality causes the political happenings driving the novel's action to take on a lifelike feel to the reader and so more closely resemble in their nature the real developments of which they are depictions.

Following the construction of a setting that could interact with the novel's political events, it was important that these events, particularly those pertaining to national politics, were portrayed within the context of this setting. In order to imbue my novel's political events with a sense of authenticity, I made use of a number of sources during the writing process, as the novelist 'has at his disposal all the resources of the historian' (Blotner, *Political Novel* 29). Much of the information contained within the novel was contributed by both print and online journalism covering devolution in the North East. Most helpful of these were local papers, notably *The Chronicle* and *The Journal*, which offered frequent updates on the development of devolution whilst the scheme was still in operation. These sources allowed me to keep abreast of events surrounding devolution, which was covered more consistently in the local tabloids, and provided a regional perspective of the process that further aided in the portrayal of the novel's setting and the sense of viewing political events from within that environment. Though Tom originates from London, for the majority of the novel he views the political action from Newcastle and bolsters the access and information he receives from Julian with these newspapers: 'I kept one eye on the local papers, but there was nothing about Gateshead Council or Gateshead itself dropping out of devolution' (ANE 89).

A similar means of creating a credible and familiar representation of events was the use of the recorded footage of political events – something that the earliest writers of the genre had to make do without. Newcastle City Council's YouTube channel hosts forty videos of City Council meetings, and the website itself has numerous videos



offering full coverage of political events including the EU referendum and the Presidential Election (Newcastle City Council). One of the scenes informed and shaped by these sources is the demonstration at Grey's Monument, an event in Newcastle following the referendum (Hutchinson, 'Watch as police circle'). Footage taken by the news outlets offered an incident which could be placed within the novel, out of which could develop Tom's description of the scene: 'A chant of "EDL" had started up, which before long mutated into louder yells of "boring" directed at the first group's spokesman, which in turn became a part of the uproar' (*ANE* 142). The minute details create a close analysis of what took place during these moments and allow for a more personal indication of these factual scenes. Tom describes the effect of the demonstration on Sonia and others in attendance, portraying their reactions. He also reveals his own immediate response to the spectacle, stating, 'there was something about the fierceness of the emotions on display that caught your attention and held you in place' (*ANE* 142), as well as its effect on Sonia and others in attendance. Through the combination of factual details and graphic description, the novel can offer a faithful account of a real political scene that is specific to Newcastle. It is intended to impress upon the reader the feelings that led to this incident and which suffuse the spectacle, creating a vivid portrayal of a political incident that links the novel's setting to national political proceedings.

This use of footage in the shaping of the novel's political scenes is also beneficial in ensuring an accurate and detailed depiction of events within the novel. The night Tom and Sonia spend watching the referendum results being announced was written using such videos as a guide, allowing for a precise recreation of the announcement of the votes, once again allowing Tom's account of events to originate from factual detail. This can be seen, for example, when Tom states, 'We'd been taken back to the footage from a sports hall in Newcastle upon Tyne, only a couple of miles away from where we were sitting. The results came in, with Remain barely edging out over Leave by less than two thousand votes' (*ANE* 119). The passage uses the information made available through the filmed events to once again create a description of the moment filled with and informed by specifics. The employment of such sources, which are both available to the reader and likely to have been viewed by those with an interest in these political events, is another means by which the legitimacy of the novel's account can be reinforced whilst placing the narrative outside of London and the recognisable centres of British democracy. The reader's identification of authentic

details supplied by the footage is intended to create a sense that the novel provides an accurate picture of the political scene, using this sense of legitimacy to reinforce its depiction of politics.

Yet although this use of detail can aid the author in representing their novel's political events with a sense of credibility, attempts to capture real politics in fiction are not straightforward. Most immediately, the political author must reconcile themselves to producing an imperfect account of the political events their fiction sets out to depict. Blotner warns that 'One should not go to political novels expecting to find, except in rare cases, complete objectivity, solidly documented references, and exhaustive expositions of political theory. He should not always anticipate credibility' (Blotner, *Political Novel* 8). Murray Edelman would reaffirm this point decades later, stating of fictional representations of politics:

There cannot be any representation that reproduces another entity, scene, or conception, but only constructions that may purport to reproduce reality while simplifying, elaborating, accenting, or otherwise constructing actualities and fantasies (Murray Edelman 7).

Some measure of simplification of the political subject matter of the novel is inevitable as a consequence of both the constraints of the work's need to contain the personal and the political, and through my own comparative inexperience with politics. I was most keenly aware of this in the passages where the novel addresses the multitude of political feelings and motivations in Newcastle surrounding both the EU referendum and the Presidential Elections, and it was clear that representing these views in too basic a manner would damage the authenticity of the political detail that I used to create the novel's milieu. To generalise the attitudes and rationale that led to Brexit and President Trump, for example, would cause the novel to perpetuate the lack of consideration towards these views and concerns that it accuses establishment politicians of exhibiting whilst simultaneously costing the setting some of its realistic and vital nature.

To avoid this oversimplification, which was undeniably present in the earliest drafts of the novel, more-recent versions of the work take care to indicate the complexity and quantity of the sentiments and ideologies of the period, even if portraying the full extent of all of these beliefs would have been too great a task for the novel. Following Trump's election victory, Tom uses the internet in an attempt to understand the political situation, stating beforehand, 'I was even less familiar with the lives and

struggles of Americans than I was of most of the people in Britain' (ANE 238). With this caveat in place, he offers several paragraphs in which he covers different attitudes that he finds during his research, such as, 'Had Hillary Clinton been particularly untrustworthy? Had the Democrats overlooked so many people that it had led to this? Were Trump or the Republican Party going to have the solution to the working-class' woes?' (ANE 238). Following his summary of his perception of the political landscape, Tom concludes, 'The sheer volume of opinions and takes on what had happened was staggering' (ANE 239). This is not an attempt to offer a complete nor a thoroughly detailed overview of the political situation, though my aim is that this acknowledgement of the multifaceted nature of the debate should prevent excessive generalisation of political sentiment. Yet whilst trying to preserve detail and political intricacy, it bears acknowledgement that 'by making complex things appear simple and appealing to emotion as much as reason, fiction has arguably more effectively contributed to popular political awareness than have politicians' little-read speeches' (Fielding 271).

Linked to this portrayal of attitudes and beliefs detailed above, another prerequisite to presenting Newcastle upon Tyne and its political events was the creation of a credible mood and setting. The milieu in which the political events were situated had to possess enough detail and life to offer what Tom Kemme terms 'the spirit of the age and an aura of ideological credibility' (Kemme 7). Kemme's choice of expression is awkward and dated, and one that I believe risks a reductive approach to the collective political and social attitudes alive within a period, if indeed one can easily define a period or age in the context of politics and political literature. It seems more appropriate, when dealing with politics to, as Daniel Wickberg recommends, 'recognize that multiple and overlapping cultural sensibilities exist at any given time' (Wickberg, 675). In particular, the time covered by *A Northern Exit*, as has been stated above, was filled with many dissenting voices and clear differences of opinion surrounding the major political happenings of that period. With this in mind, it seems best to look for an alternative to a phrase that brings to mind 'uniform and homogeneous sensibilities', such as *spirit of the age*. (Wickberg, 675). It might be more appropriate to refer instead to *a sense of the period*, admitting a range of dissimilar feelings and opinions that I, similarly to Kemme, believe to be a vital part of the portrayal of the political scene. To accomplish this, the novelist should attempt to contain within their fiction 'the sight, sound, and feel of the political experience'

(Blotner, *Modern American Political Novel* 6). My intention in the creation of this novel is that readers should feel for themselves the atmosphere of the setting in which the work's events take place and thus gain an understanding of the attitudes and beliefs that contributed to their formation and motivate political action.

The resource I primarily relied upon to achieve this recreation of the feeling in this period was my own experience throughout the interval the novel covers. During the events contained within the novel, I was based in the North East, inhabiting the same space as Tom, Julian and Sonia. Whilst I did not have the same proximity to political figures as Tom, resulting in my need to make use of news sources, the internet and online videos for the political detail the novel required, this first-hand experience of the wider milieu allowed me to depict accurately the emotions surrounding and the reaction to the sequence of political incidents. My intention was that the factual detail and the authentic scenes that the news outlets and video footage made possible resulted in a faithful portrayal of the political atmosphere. Several scenes within the novel are drawn from my own experiences and activities during these events; these include Tom and Sonia's night in Newcastle the night of the referendum, the tour of Parliament and the night after Trump's election. Through my positioning, I was able to observe the mood and reactions surrounding the key political events in the novel within Newcastle and thus include these details within the novel, such as Tom's description of the atmosphere during the approach of the referendum:

The following months were a blur of long days, late nights and frothing rhetoric. Against the backdrop of the looming EU referendum, day-to-day life slowly seemed to lose its volume and colour. It was, after all, trying to compete against an ever-shifting swirl of non-stop shouting. Everyone, gradually, was becoming infuriated with someone else (*ANE* 104).

In order to increase the force of these descriptions and create a more detailed portrayal of the political occurrences and the reaction to them, I endeavoured to write the novel alongside the events as they unfolded, so as to create a realistic sense of immediacy in their depiction and in Tom's reaction to them. Whilst the prose would go through edits and redrafts, by incorporating my initial reaction to developments such as Brexit and devolution I was able to include authentic emotional responses to major political events. This is by no means the sole method available to the political novelist, who has the freedom to set their work in the past, as Eliot elected to do in *Felix Holt*, or else to create an imagined setting for the political action in the style of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. These approaches also allow the novelist far more

control over the political action they portray, owing to its fictitious nature or to it already having taken place. Yet as a result of writing *A Northern Exit* concurrent to the political action it portrayed, I could create a sense of the mood and context in which these developments took place, formed from genuine feelings experienced in the moments of discovery and representing the atmosphere specific to the setting. This is evident following the EU referendum as Tom, venturing outside, notes, 'We stepped out of the apartment with silent trepidation, ready for screaming mobs, roaring fires and the sound of jackboots marching in synchronised goosetstep. There was nothing. The world seemed much the same as it had been before' (*ANE* 137). This expectation of a violent reaction following the referendum and the subsequent surprise at the apparent lack of response, as well as similar descriptions throughout the novel, were taken from my immediate impressions of the tone and atmosphere within Newcastle and Gateshead, which it was my practice to record whenever I was able to observe the milieu. The inclusion of these impressions within *A Northern Exit*, taken from my scrutiny of the setting and the body politic, is part of my efforts to present not only the events of the period in which the novel is situated, but the climate in which these political developments came about. As a result, the novel can offer a more complete and detailed view of the political scene as a means of strengthening its portrayal.

Yet in relying upon my own experiences and observations to represent the political sphere in fiction, I risk exposing myself to accusations that what I present is a biased or flawed account of either the events or the response to them. Speare, examining the early development of the political fiction genre in 1924, cautioned that 'by making your own interpretation of a state of things, you immediately exclude the views of others. The moment you begin to select and to emphasize you lay yourself open to the charge of preaching' (Speare 27). Any political narrative based on the writer's perception or account of real events shares this vulnerability, but the hazard is undoubtedly greater when dealing with occurrences that invite debate and disagreement of a partisan nature. The use of a pro-Remain narrator stands to exacerbate this risk to how the novel's representation of politics is regarded by its readers, as Tom's beliefs may be taken by the reader as an indication to the ideology with which my sympathies lie.

Despite Fielding's assertion that 'In all forms of representation, including the political, distortion is inherent', I attempted to counter Speare's 'charge of preaching' by ensuring that my observations of the political scene took into account the broad

range of beliefs present in the milieu, letting them inform my study of the scene and ensuring that my account does not reject or undermine them through its portrayal (Fielding 18). Blotner's advice for the political novelist is to be both perceptive and detached, thus enabling the creation of a work containing the same accuracy as a factual historical account, and I employed this approach in my depiction of the period, bolstering it with the use of sources and documents mentioned above (Blotner, *Political Novel* 29). The detachment Blotner refers to may be made more difficult to communicate through the first-person voice, particularly one that vocalises my personal reactions to political events. However, I attempted to accomplish within the novel through Tom's maturation, discussed earlier in this commentary, making him consciously attempt to understand or engage with opposing points of view. An example of this can be seen following the EU referendum, where Tom tells himself, 'You couldn't call that many people racist, ignorant or delusional: it was mad to think that a group that large could all in some way be demonstrably wrong' (ANE 145). Any work of political fiction will be vulnerable to accusations of partisanship, and the risk of this charge is undoubtedly increased when the author draws upon their own perspective. Yet should they endeavour to ensure that their portrayal of the atmosphere and feeling within their milieu is presented without personal bias and imbued with vibrant scenes from their own observations, the authentic description of the setting and the attitudes it displays will allow for a credible presentation of the political scene.

Another challenge I faced whilst attempting to set the political novel within Newcastle came as a consequence of the timeline of my project coinciding with the major political events of 2016, in particular the EU referendum. As I have stated above, the majority of *A Northern Exit* was written alongside the events it depicts. Although I believe that addressing the political events and their effect on the novel's setting from as immediate a position as possible allows for a more compelling presentation the milieu, this method placed me in a position of particular vulnerability in terms of the novel's setting in relation to its political action.

In previous chapters, I have mentioned the effect upon the presentation of character and the proposed direction of the novel that came as a result of the EU referendum. Prior to the result, I had not anticipated much focus upon the EU referendum other than as a means of depicting the broader political scene that the regional activity would interact with and play out against, situating the fictional movements of the characters in a recognisable period. This was partly due to my intention that the novel's focus

should be the North East and devolution, whilst also as a result of my belief that the referendum would result in a vote to remain within the EU, as the majority of polls and predictions indicated (Duncan, 'How the pollsters'). When the results were revealed, I had already written a brief section of the novel covering the day of the vote and the announcement of the result that I had predicted. The narrative would then have moved swiftly on from the referendum to focus on the problems of devolution. As a result, I was in the position of having to drastically alter the proposed trajectory of the novel, not least because the Newcastle now lacked much of the political activity that *A Northern Exit* was to be based around.

It is partly on account of this loss that Parliament features in the novel following the referendum, offering both a recognisable political location and the promise of continued political activity following the absence of devolution. Yet unless the remainder of the narrative was to take place there, the treatment of the North East and its political significance within the novel required modification, in a similar fashion to effects of the referendum result on the novel's principal characters examined in Chapter Two. In part, this took the form of emphasising the distance of Newcastle from the national political activity following the referendum, accomplished by the treatment of the region by Tom's relatives in London, 'all of whom seemed astonished that I'd managed to return from the North alive and in one piece' (ANE 183). The region's loss of political momentum as a result of the eventual collapse of devolution is also presented in grim terms by the novel, with Tom describing Julian as 'practically a prisoner in Newcastle', drawing a link between the region's distance from political influence and that experienced by Julian (ANE 196). These alterations allowed Newcastle to remain the setting of the narrative, reflecting the attitudes present following the referendum, still connected to the novel's political substance. Moving forward, in an attempt to prepare for further unexpected changes in the short-term political scene following the EU referendum, my approach was to conceive speculative alternatives to my newly-proposed narrative based on what appeared at the time to be the most prominent causes of upheaval.

Despite these steps taken to accommodate the results of the EU referendum and further unforeseen eventualities, it is clear that anchoring a work of political fiction to a location other than central institutions such as Parliament or government offices is an approach that can invite unforeseen challenges. It is true that *A Northern Exit* offers a fairly extreme example, especially when one considers the unanticipated nature of

the EU referendum result, yet it seems apparent that had the novel placed its characters in the traditional centres of British politics, or had Julian retained a link to Parliament by remaining an MP, this event would not have affected the novel's trajectory nor that of its characters to the same extent. This difficulty was also made more severe as a result of my writing the novel contemporaneous to the events it portrays. Had I instead represented the political events from the position of looking back at a completed series of events, I would have been able to begin the writing process fully aware of the consequences of placing the novel almost entirely within the North East. Yet I believe that this sense of uncertainty and immediacy present in relation to the politics has aided in the depiction of the setting's atmosphere, which has in turn ensured that the political action and the setting of the fiction remain closely linked through this interaction. It was, of course, necessary to alter the political significance of Newcastle as a response to the referendum result, yet doing so enables the fiction to impart to the reader a sense of how it felt to be in the North East as these political events took place, as well as some understanding of the personal perceptions of these developments. The addition of this element of the setting to the depiction of the novel's political substance as a whole helped strengthen the representation of politics.

To summarise this chapter, one can conclude that a significant task of the political novel is to both represent and situate the politics of the fiction within its proper context, both in terms of its setting and the atmosphere of the era. The best political fiction endeavours to situate its politics within an authentic, credible representation of the sense of place and period. In doing so, the political novelist can demonstrate how the politics are a product of the atmosphere they seek to capture. Various devices at the author's disposal can help create this credible simulacrum of political feeling, such as the use of notable political figures populating the Commons, or the representation of real politics in a fictional environment. The use of institutions and locations traditionally associated with the political sphere can add further to this sense of authority and authenticity in the fiction, relying on the recognition such structures can generate in the reader.

Yet the political novelist should be mindful of the implications their choice of setting can have in relation to the novel's political substance. Politics has the capacity to swiftly transform itself, and in the process can have a significant effect on a location, whether this comes in the form of a change in a constituency's political affiliation, or the proximity to political action offered to a region. This risk can be minimised either



by placing one's political fiction within an imagined location in which the novelist dictates the relationship between the setting and their work's political element, or else by depicting political activity that has already taken place prior to the time of writing. However, should the author decide to represent the politics of the period as they take place, the element of affect and personal feeling can be far more intense, allowing for a depiction of political events greeted with a genuine emotional response from the characters, the population of its setting and, it is intended, the reader. Should this be attempted, the politics that are to be portrayed will remain unpredictable, yet there is the benefit of guaranteed immediacy to the political action offered by the nation's key political institutions, which can offer an ideal position for the novel's characters to witness and interact with a range of political narratives. If, instead, the political novelist wishes to situate their representation of politics at a distance from the traditional centres of democracy, then they would be wise to proceed with either some assurance that this location will remain close to the political action within the novel or in a position to modify their chosen setting in order to accommodate the changing political scene. This is by no means impossible, though it is nevertheless a challenge that the novelist must be prepared to overcome in their attempt to craft a strong and vital representation of political activity.

## CONCLUSION

Through both writing and reflecting upon the process of producing *A Northern Exit*, there are conclusions at which I have arrived regarding the nature of the political novel.

There are, undoubtedly, challenges inherent in the creation of a prose work of political fiction, some of which are particular to the political genre. These challenges are, for the most part, a result of the political subject matter that the novel focuses upon, whether this is in the form of characters whose main function is political, the examination of policies and processes within a political environment, or the exploration of the political action or thought of a period.

When one includes political action or thought within one's novel, the absorption of such elements into the narrative is far from straightforward. Stendhal's pistol-shot is a constant reminder of how the exploration of political ideology can disrupt the flow of fiction; it may invite opposition from those with dissimilar views or through its abstract nature, resisting assimilation into a narrative of private motivation and personal feeling. Yet this can also cause the political content of the novel to become vitalised through its interaction with the personal or emotional element of the narrative, whilst allowing the private acts and motivations of the novel's characters to take on a political dimension of their own.

In *A Northern Exit*, much of the novel's tension and driving force is due to the deeply personal manner in which Julian confronts politics as a national and international institution, and which adds a poignant tone to his fall. Similarly, the novel seeks to politicise the personal relationships of its characters, such as the taut relationship between Julian and Sonia. The underlying strain of their association causes their interactions to take on a political significance, and this leads to the rivalry's conclusion being carried out in an explicitly political fashion.

Another challenge to overcome is the nature of political action. Political processes at most levels, and particularly at the level which attracts fictional portrayal, are a complex matter at best and byzantine at worst, employing a staggering number of participants to enact. The novelist who makes politics their focus must undertake the task with the understanding that the political detail must be simplified in order that its movements and consequences might be understood by those without the necessary experience of its nebulous nature. However, they must be cautious that their

representation of political activity is not so broad that the authenticity nor significance of the politics' nature is abandoned.

A chief factor in achieving this is the mode through which the novel's events are related. The omniscient narrator possesses the freedom to survey the varying components of the political machine, presenting a more complete view of the political action and its effect upon the body politic. Yet we have seen the force that a close examination of motive and private feeling can lend the political novel, and too impersonal a narration risks this element being diminished and so too the dynamism it grants the novel.

If the novel therefore employs the perspective of a single figure, then the author must position this character with care. This may require the representation of a political process to be limited in scope in the interests of presenting to the reader a more complete view of the political action, or else it may necessitate the ability of the character to maintain a presence in different parts of the political sphere so that detail might be preserved. Equally, attention must be paid to the identity of this character; do their actions or background undermine the validity of the political movement predicted? If political events are told through their voice, what significance does their tone have for the representation? A lively or even ironic voice is a means through which to create a greater engagement between the reader and the text, as is my intention in the use of Tom as my narrator. However, the sardonic manner of speech Tom employs risks weakening the force and weight of the political action, the presence of which is necessary for the personal reactions to the novel's political events to appear authentic. The novelist must be sure that the voice *serves the political strength of the novel*, charging the relationship between the private and public spheres.

Finally, the political novelist must overcome the challenge posed by the unpredictability of political events. The most severe challenge that I faced in writing *A Northern Exit* was as a result of underestimating the changeability of politics in 2016. Politics, its future only able to be forecast or predicted by methods that can never guarantee complete accuracy, retains its potential to surprise. 2016 and the years since have been characterised by startling, at times bewildering, political developments, and such events led to my planned narrative being frustrated and the outcomes and occurrences which I had relied upon being subject to great change.

The political novelist must therefore recognise the mercurial nature of the activity and institutions they attempt to place within their novel, alive to the notion that what

might seem certain and what their fiction depends upon may come about in an unanticipated manner, or else not at all. The impulse to depict the living, flowing political activity of the period as it unfolds must be tempered by this awareness. It is this need for caution that presents challenges in formulating both the political and personal sides of the narrative beyond certain expected developments. Therefore, it is understandable that political novelists may set novels several decades in the past, depicting political action which has already been realised, or else create a fictional locale in which the novelist can represent and respond to the sentiment and attitudes surrounding the politics of their day, without fear of unforeseen shifts in the political sphere threatening their proposed narratives.

Yet it is this need to react to the forces of history and politics as they took place during the writing process that is responsible for *A Northern Exit*'s final form. In representing political activity as it took place, the principal characters responded to the events of the novel as extensions of my own authentic reactions, both portraying a sense of the period and offering realistic, subjective responses to the shift from one political era to another. Without this element, it is my belief that the novel would lack a great deal of its force, and that the consequences of recent political events would not hold the same weight with which I have endeavoured to instil them. There are scenes of humour, bitterness and reflection which might never have been included had it not been for the unforeseen developments that provoked such responses.

To conclude this reflection, I believe that it is appropriate to claim that there are specific challenges in the production of a political novel, resulting from its required interaction with political institutions and activity. Yet I also believe that by confronting these obstacles, the novelist gains the opportunity to imbue their writing with a vitality that invigorates the novel's political action. With the convincing exploration of motive, and the personal feeling of those who inhabit the political milieu, the novelist can produce a work that can outlast the context in which it was created, possessed of its own literary and political potency.

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